In Dependence: Liberty, Slavery & Choice
At the Stephen Hopkins House

A project of the students of AMCV 1903Z
“Shrine, House, or Home: Rethinking the Historic House Museum”

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Statement of Purpose

Project Mission

“InDependence: Liberty, Slavery & Choice” utilizes the Stephen Hopkins House as a place to explore ideas of freedom and enslavement, their effects on personal agency and choice, and the ways in which these themes reverberate with contemporary audiences.

Best known for his contributions to the political and economic growth of Providence and as a signer of the Declaration of Independence, a document that asserted all men were created equal, Stephen Hopkins was also a slave owner. Utilizing historical documents, material culture—including the Hopkins’ home—and informed speculation, InDependence places this iconic Rhode Island figure within the context and fabric of his time.

The lives of Stephen Hopkins, his wife Anna Smith Hopkins, and their slaves, Fibbo, St. Jago, Prince, Primus, Adam, and Bonner will help visitors to understand and discuss the political, social, and moral complexities of freedom and slavery, and the interdependencies that characterized 18th century colonial America.

Project Themes

Dependence and Independence: What did the terms "liberty" and "slavery" mean to Stephen Hopkins, his contemporaries, his family members, and enslaved persons? How did these meanings shift throughout time?

Individual Choice and Implications: Was Hopkins simply "a man of his times" participating in a culture and economy that endorsed and profited from the slavery system, or was he capable of rejecting this system through individual choice? How did the lack of individual choice impact and characterize the lives of enslaved persons?

Impact on the Hopkins Household: How were the themes of dependence, independence, and choice reflected in the daily lives of the people who lived and worked within the Hopkins household?

Project Goals:

Energize the interpretation of the Stephen Hopkins House by using period rooms and spaces for quiet reflection, questioning, and debate, while encouraging visitors to form their own opinions and perceptions about the character of Stephen Hopkins and complex issues of slavery and freedom.

Explore Stephen Hopkins in all of his complexities, as politician, merchant, slaveholder, husband, friend, Quaker and citizen.
Examine the nuances of personal dependence and independence through common experiences of enslavement and the nature of gender relations and conventions of the period, especially through the lives of women and slaves about whom the historical record is less complete.

Present Stephen Hopkins as a multifaceted historical figure, including his notable accomplishments, internal conflicts, and the flaws and personal foibles that characterized his life.

Utilize the Stephen Hopkins House and its collections to present the daily routines of the Hopkins household, using moment-in-time installations to create the appearance of an inhabited and personal space.

Relate to contemporary audiences by exploring the meaning of personal choice as it pertained to participation in the 18th century slave system, encouraging a consideration of the ways in which twenty-first century American consumer culture also includes personal choice, moral implications, and dependence on existing cultural and economic systems.

Create a balanced and inclusive interpretation that is accessible to contemporary audiences while also acknowledging and respecting the contributions of the Rhode Island Chapter of the Society of Colonial Dames to the Stephen Hopkins House.

**Audience:**

By utilizing the Hopkins House as a space to encourage visitors to be self reflective about the themes of independence, dependence, and choice, this project seeks to appeal to a broad audience that includes drop-in tourists, the Providence community, students, and audiences previously that have been traditionally under-served.

The creation of a “Theme Room” provides a space for individual reflection and discussion for small groups of school-age children. Additional planning will be necessary to adapt this interpretation plan to fit state curriculum standards for Rhode Island colonial history and American civics.

**Outcomes:**

*InDependence* will spark thought and discussion on a variety of historical and contemporary issues that will continue beyond the walls of the Hopkins House. Audiences will emerge with a clear imagining of Rhode Island colonial life and of the inhabitants of the Hopkins House as real people rather than mythic figures from the distant past.

Visitors will understand that history is comprised of a series of individual choices rather than inevitable outcomes. This will facilitate visitors’ ability to make connections between the moral ambiguity inherent in some choices and the resulting consequences in their own lives and in contemporary society.
Room-by-Room Interpretation

Study/North Room

Tours will commence in this space, which will serve as an introduction to Stephen Hopkins as public and prominent figure in Providence and Rhode Island.

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<tr>
<th>Story/Stories</th>
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<td>Hopkins as a public figure</td>
<td>Stephen Hopkins</td>
<td>Desk</td>
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<td>Gaspee gavel</td>
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<td>First page of <em>The Rights of Colonies Examined</em> (reproduction)</td>
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Introduction:

Welcome to the Governor Stephen Hopkins House. As you tour the house, try to imagine it as it may have looked between 1774 and 1785, during the latter years of Hopkins’ life and at the peak of his career as merchant and politician.

- Stephen Hopkins was born in 1707 and grew up in Scituate, Rhode Island, just west of Providence. He was trained as a farmer and a land surveyor, although he received little formal education.
- In 1726, Hopkins married his first wife, Sarah Scott, with whom he fathered five sons and two daughters. After Sarah’s death in 1753, Hopkins married Anna Smith two years later. ¹
- Hopkins moved to Providence in 1742, and he purchased this house in 1743. In 1755, he expanded the house, constructing an addition featuring a central hallway and entry in keeping with the style, if not the size, of other prominent Georgian homes in Providence. Hopkins lived here until his death in 1785. ²

Q: Has anyone heard of Stephen Hopkins before? What do you know about him? You may have noticed a plaque outside the house that contained the following brief biography:

Stephen Hopkins, 1707 - 1785
Merchant and Ship Builder
Ten Times Governor of Rhode Island
Chief Justice of the Superior Court
Chancellor of Brown University
Member of the Colonial Congress
Signer of the Declaration of Independence
Lived in this House 1743 - 1785
Washington was here a Guest April 6, 1776
This is the familiar description of Stephen Hopkins—as one of 18th century Providence’s most prominent men.

However, this is just one description of Hopkins. As you explore his home, I hope you will get a more detailed picture of this man, his beliefs and actions, and the individuals closest to him—including his family, his professional and social contacts, and his slaves.

Sometimes when we think about history, the events that unfolded seemed inevitable, but let's remember, like you and me, Hopkins struggled with many decisions, and the future was not always certain for him.

Hopkins’ Public Career:

- Hopkins’ career as public servant began in 1731 when he arrived in Providence. He served a variety of roles as town clerk, town official, justice of the peace, and eventually Chief Justice of the Providence County Court of Common Pleas.³

- In 1755, Hopkins served the first of ten (one-year) terms as Governor of Rhode Island. He was also Rhode Island’s delegate to the first and second Continental Congresses from 1773-1776, as well as one of the two signers of the Declaration of Independence representing the colony of Rhode Island (the other was Newport merchant, William Ellery).⁴

- During his political career, Hopkins befriended men like Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and George Washington.

- Stephen Hopkins was a strong proponent of the rights of American colonists. In response the Sugar Act of 1764, which restricted the ability of American merchants to trade freely in the West Indies, Hopkins wrote a widely circulated pamphlet, The Rights of the Colonies Examined.

- In the first sentence of this pamphlet, Hopkins equated the state of colonists as similar to those living under the condition of slavery. He wrote, “Liberty is the greatest blessing that men enjoy, and slavery is the heaviest curse that human nature is capable of.”⁵

- On the secretary desk is a gavel, said to be have been made of wood from the floorboards of the building where the bullets used to assault the HMS Gaspee were made.
The British revenue schooner HMS *Gaspee* arrived in Rhode Island waters in March of 1772 to enforce the crown’s customs regulations. While pursuing an American cargo vessel, the *Hannah*, the *Gaspee* ran aground. Providence merchant John Brown organized and led a small group of men to capture the *Gaspee*’s commander. The *Gaspee*’s crew offered little resistance and the ship was set ablaze. This was one of the earliest acts of violent resistance to British rule.

Although Hopkins did not take part in the attack, he worked to impede the British investigation of the *Gaspee*’s burning to protect his fellow patriots, including his friend and business associate John Brown, the leader of what came to be known as the *Gaspee* affair. The people Hopkins protected likely presented him this gavel as a token of appreciation.

**Hopkins as a Slave Owner**

- Although Stephen Hopkins fought against the tyranny of British oppression, comparing it to slavery in his writings, he owned at least seven slaves throughout his lifetime. They are documented in two wills; in the records of the Quaker meeting, of which he was a member; and the 1774 Rhode Island census. Their names were Adam, Bonner, Fibbo, Primus, Priamus, Prince, and St. Jago.

- Often when people think of slavery, images of sprawling plantations in the American South come to mind. While this may be the “popular” image of American slavery, the institution existed here in the North as well, dating back to the late 17th century.

- Although it may be tempting to focus on the differences between the northern and southern forms of slavery, exploring the commonalities between the two regions makes for a much richer history. Bondage slavery was a system that deprived human beings of free will and choice in all matters of their lives, including decisions about their livelihoods, the places where they lived, and their own children and families.

- By stripping away all forms of personal choice and independence, slavery created a series of dependencies that characterized the relationship between slave and master. Hopkins’ slaves were dependent on him for food and shelter, while Hopkins and his family relied on the labor of their slaves to provide income, a comfortable home, and free time to dedicate to his political and business careers.
Transition to Parlor:

We know from Hopkins' letters to his second wife, Anna Smith Hopkins, that his political and business enterprises kept him away from Providence home for long periods. However, during his travels and a while at home, Hopkins was known for being an enthusiastic entertainer. Let's look at the parlor where Hopkins would have socialized with business partners and friends.

Parlor

This room explores the social life of Stephen Hopkins, as one of the wealthy merchant "elites" of Providence, and the intricate connections between Providence merchants and the African slave trade. This space also introduces Stephen Hopkins as a person, rather than a mythologized or idealized historical figure.

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<thead>
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<th>Story/Stories</th>
<th>People</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Hopkins’ private/social life</td>
<td>Stephen Hopkins</td>
<td>“Sea Captains Carousing in Surinam” (reproduction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brown family</td>
<td>Decanters, bottles, punch bowl, clay pipes, candle, drinking glasses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hopkins’ family, including his brother Esek</td>
<td>Numerous chairs (“1/2 doz. chairs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and his sons George and Rufus)</td>
<td>Tea table (“round table”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hopkins’ as a Providence merchant</td>
<td>Stephen Hopkins, John Brown, enslaved persons</td>
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</table>

Introduction:

During the 18th century, occupants used rooms flexibly to fit their needs. This space would have served as the “best room” of the house—the site of baptismal receptions, weddings, funerals, and important entertaining and dining events.8

- The Hopkins’ family may have also taken their meals in this room, eating individually at the small tables seen here rather than dining together as a family at one large table as we do in the present day.9
The parlor is depicted as a male-dominated space, cluttered with the aftermath of an evening of Hopkins’ socializing with his Providence merchant and political friends.

Hopkins had a congenial and social side, remarked upon by John Adams, who served with Hopkins at the Continental Congress from 1774-1776. Adams wrote:

“When the Business of the Evening was over, [Hopkins] kept Us in Conversation till Eleven and sometimes twelve O Clock... His Beveredge was Jamaica Spirit and Water. It gave him Wit, Humour, Anecdotes, Science and Learning. He had read Greek, Roman and British History: and was familiar with English Poetry particularly Pope, Tompson and Milton... Hopkins never drank to excess, but all he drank was immediately not only converted into Wit, Sense, Knowledge and good humour, but inspired Us all with similar qualities.”

Q: What do you think that this quote and the items in this room suggest about Hopkins’ social life?

- The furnishings in this room—fine porcelain, elegant furniture—are high quality goods that suggest a wealthy owner with enough leisure time, income, and social status to designate a space within the house for entertaining.

- The vignette in this room, depicting the aftermath of a party, was inspired by a 1750s painting by John Greenwood, "Sea Captains Carousing in Surinam." The painting depicts a drunken gathering in a tavern in the slave-trading port of Surinam. [Note the person vomiting into someone's pocket, the bowl of rum being poured over someone's head, the person whose tailcoat is catching fire]
Despite the artist’s intent to satirize these Rhode Island merchants and their leisure activities, there is some truth in his inclusion of Stephen Hopkins, asleep—or passed out—at the table. Other identifiable men in the painting are Joseph Wanton, a Newport merchant and Rhode Island governor, to the right of Hopkins; Stephen Hopkins’ brother Esek on his left; and seated next to Esek, Nicholas Cooke, another Rhode Island governor and sea captain. The artist, John Greenwood, satirized himself in the painting. He is the man leaning against the door and vomiting.

Hopkins also was said to have earned the nickname, "Old Grapes and Guts," while at Continental Congress, a reference to his fondness for alcoholic beverages. Hopkins’ contemporaries might have considered him “intemperate,” or prone to excess drinking. However, because of the lack of clean water, alcohol in the form of local cider and local strong and weak ale and rum were served with every meal, including breakfast. Every man, woman and child in colonial New England drank the equivalent of five shots of rum per day.

**Links with Slavery**

Q: Who is serving the merchants in the Surinam tavern?

This lifestyle of wealth and luxury goods was not available to the majority of the colonial population. This painting is a comical, and very human, depiction of one of our founding fathers. But it also places Hopkins physically within the culture of slavery, drinking rum, one of the most important products of American slavery, in Surinam, a slave trading port.

The goods that Hopkins placed aboard his trading vessels were dictated by availability, and they might have included commodities ranging from lumber, horses, rum, sugar, coffee, and cocoa, to English export goods like ceramics, cloth, and fancy goods.11

Stephen Hopkins’ brother, Esek, and John Brown, with whom Hopkins was affiliated socially and politically, were involved in the slave trade. While Hopkins apparently never directly bought a share in a slave voyage, he benefited from the products of the “triangle trade” and from the labor of enslaved peoples in his household.

While Hopkins’ slaves left few documents of their own, much like the slaves in this painting, Hopkins’ own slaves would have helped with preparations for social gatherings in his house, serving guests at these events, and cleaning the chaotic aftermath.

Colonial elites like Hopkins may have been most directly connected to slavery as slave owners, but the influence of slavery extended through all layers and classes of colonial life. The institution of slavery and its byproducts, such as rum and sugar, were major components of colonial life. Even individuals who did not own slaves participated in the system through the products they chose to buy and the wages they made by helping to build and provision slave vessels.
Transition to parlor chamber:

While the parlor was primarily a space for public interactions, dominated by the male members of the household, upper-class colonial women created their own independent spaces within the household. Let’s move upstairs to explore the social life of Anna Hopkins.

Parlor Chamber

This room will examine the social world of upper class women in the colonial era, depicted through Stephen Hopkins' second wife, Anna, and the interactions between husband and wife.

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<tr>
<th>Story/Stories</th>
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<tr>
<td>Upper-class women’s social sphere</td>
<td>Sarah Hopkins, Anna Hopkins</td>
<td>Tea table, chairs, needlework sampler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s “participation” in slavery/slave trade</td>
<td>Anna Hopkins, Slaves (Fibbo)</td>
<td>Chinese porcelain tea set, toile de Jouy curtains and bedhangings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender roles</td>
<td>Anna Hopkins, Stephen Hopkins</td>
<td>Unmade bed, garment of clothing laid out on top</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Introduction

This room would have served as the Hopkins' bedchamber, but Anna Hopkins would also have used this room for entertaining and social activities, outside of her husband's social sphere. Today, we might consider this the "master bedroom," but, like the parlor downstairs, 18th century household rooms were adapted to fit the residents' needs and usually served more than one function

- The room’s furnishings indicate that this was Anna Hopkins’s space for entertaining. For instance, the small tea table is where she might have served tea to visiting friends. In addition, the room contains luxury items, such as the fine china, drapes, and looking glass, which Anna displayed as indications of her wealth and status.

- Unlike the parlor, this room is interpreted as a female-dominated space. The room is arranged to reflect its usage by Anna Smith Hopkins, Stephen Hopkins' second wife. His first wife, Sarah, died in 1753.

- Sarah Hopkins was described as "a kindly, industrious, and frugal woman, a good mother and an affectionate wife." She gave birth to seven children and spent most of her married life in Scituate, Rhode Island, before Stephen Hopkins abandoned farming, purchased this house in 1743, and turned his attention to mercantile activities.

- Life in sparsely populated Scituate would have been vastly different from the life that Sarah experienced after the Hopkinesses relocated to Providence. With the responsibilities related to farm work, Sarah would have had limited time in Scituate to engage in leisure pursuits.
• Anna Smith married Stephen Hopkins two years after the death of Sarah. Anna lived here during Stephen Hopkins’ most active political career, from her marriage to Stephen in 1755 until her death in 1782.

• Anna came from a genteel background. She was born into a well-established family, directly descended from John Smith, one of Roger Williams’ Providence co-founders. Other members of the Smith family married successful mercantile leaders in the area, connecting Stephen Hopkins with social and business connections.14

• As a member of the Society of Friends, Anna Smith Hopkins may not have led as ostentatious a lifestyle as others of her station, but she would have been accustomed to social luxuries such as "taking tea" with her friends using elegant porcelain.15

• Needlework (represented by the samplers) was one of the most popular leisure activities for women in the 18th century, especially for someone in Anna Hopkins’ position. Women were expected to develop their needlework abilities at a young age, and it was considered a measure of skill and accomplishment. Needlework was an integral part of women’s social lives, so when Anna had visitors, they probably would have spent their time chatting, drinking tea, and working on their intricate needlework projects.16

• Stephen Hopkins was frequently away from Providence for business and political reasons, leaving his wife with relative independence and freedom to operate the household as she chose.17 Still, Anna Hopkins was legally bound to her husband,18 so it is questionable how closely the lofty ideals of independence proposed by Stephen Hopkins and his fellow revolutionary leaders applied to her.

• On this subject, Abigail Adams wrote to her husband John at Continental Congress,

“...I long to hear that you have declared an independancy—and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could.”19
Links with slavery

- While Anna might have enjoyed some independence of her own, especially when Stephen was away, she remained dependent on enslaved persons to free her from much of the manual labor that Sarah experienced in Scituate. The labor of slaves provided Anna with time for leisure, socializing, and enjoyment of luxury goods.

Q: Who cleaned the tea service, made the beds, emptied the chamber pots, and did household cleaning?

- Records indicate that Stephen Hopkins owned a female slave named Fibbo, perhaps from her childhood, whom he left to Anna in his 1761 will. It is impossible to document Fibbo's role within the house with any certainty, but she might have served as a cook and general housekeeper. With Fibbo responsible for everyday domestic chores, Anna Hopkins had the freedom to spend her time elsewhere.

- The luxury goods that Anna Hopkins enjoyed also connected her indirectly to the slave trade. Anna Hopkins fit into a larger colonial economy, in which women enjoyed the fruits of wealth obtained through the slave trade.

- British tea, Chinese porcelain, and toile de Jouy draperies were all luxury goods imported by merchants who also traded slaves, molasses, or rum (the primary products of the Triangle Trade).

- While Anna Smith Hopkins’ general feelings about the institution of slavery are unknown, Abigail Adams expressed her feelings to her husband on this subject as well:

  “I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be Eaquelly [sic] Strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs. Of this I am certain that it is not founded upon that generous and christian principal of doing to others as we would that others should do unto us.”

Transition to Kitchen Chamber:

Your next stop is down the hallway to the very rear of the house, where you will see evidence of a lifestyle markedly different from the one enjoyed by Stephen and Anna Hopkins in this room.

Slave Chamber

This room examines the vast difference in lifestyle between the white and enslaved occupants within the Hopkins House. The furnishings in this room are sparse and of little monetary value, as evidenced by the 1785 probate inventory of Hopkins’ estate. (Guides should provide visitors with a moment for quiet reflection in this space.)
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle of enslaved persons</td>
<td>Enslaved persons</td>
<td>“1 narrow bedstead of cord”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“1 chest of drawers (very poor)”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Flannel blankets, sheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentary evidence for interpretation of this room as a slave sleeping area</td>
<td>1785 Probate inventory</td>
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- Hopkins’ slaves likely would have slept in this room.

- In Stephen Hopkins’ last will and testament, written four years before his death, he refers to male and female slaves who were “of age,” which men achieved at the age of twenty-one, and women at age eighteen. He also refers to male and female slaves who were not of age, so it is possible that he owned up to six or eight slaves in 1781, including some children.

- It is impossible to say with any certainty how many enslaved persons slept in this room. Some of the men might have slept in outbuildings on the property. The available records also do not indicate whether any of the slaves were related, but it is possible that parents and their children shared this cramped space.
Q: How do we know this is the room where the slaves slept?

- The room is located at the rear of the house, down the hallway and far from the larger and better-appointed sleeping chambers in the front of the house. It is also located in close proximity to the kitchen below. This would have permitted the slaves to wake early in the morning to begin their chores without disturbing the Hopkins family.

- There is also documentary evidence that this room was used by enslaved persons. After Stephen Hopkins’ death, the court of probate required an inventory of his personal estate. This room, identified in the inventory as the “kitchen chamber,” was very poorly appointed, reflecting the inability of slaves to purchase more than the most basic personal items. Hopkins’ slaves would have depended on him for everything else.

Inventory of the personal estate of Stephen Hopkins (kitchen chamber), 1785 (recreation from original document)

- (The inventory for this room is posted on the wall. The guide may choose to read or mention some of the items.) Among other items, this room contained one chest of drawers, described as “very poor;” a narrow bedstead, homespun blankets, and an old bed quilt. Noticeably absent is a looking glass, or mirror, an item listed in nearly every living space in the house.

- The total value of the belongings in this room is five pounds, five shillings. This accounts for just three percent of the total value of Hopkins’ personal estate.

Transition to North Chamber

Back up the hallway, you will have an opportunity to continue to examine the complex themes of independence and dependence, and their impact on the lives of the people who lived in this house.

North Chamber (Theme Room)

The North Chamber will provide an opportunity for visitors to explore the themes of liberty, slavery, and choice and to contemplate the complexities of history by examining Hopkins’ seemingly contradictory words and actions related to the subject of slavery. Visitors will also consider how they face similar questions and challenges in their own lives.

This room, unlike other spaces in the house, will utilize an exhibit-style installation to facilitate self-reflection about the project’s themes of liberty, slavery, and choice. Graphics and label text will serve as the primary means for reflection and discussion.
By now, you have heard about Stephen Hopkins and other people who lived in this house, including his wives and his slaves. It is important to share the stories of all of these individuals, but their voices are not given equal weight in the historical record.

When we talk about Hopkins' relationships with his slaves, there is much we do not know, since these individuals left behind few documents of their own. We have very little information about the lives of the enslaved persons in this house, and any attempt at recreation would be false.

Instead, we chose this room—which was likely a sleeping space in Hopkins’ time—to consider the larger question of slavery and dependence in colonial America and today. Please take a few moments to look around the room and consider the questions and graphics on the wall, and then lift the panel to read more information. As with any historical document, these may be interpreted in different ways by different people.

Where can we find evidence today about African Americans during Stephen Hopkins’ time?

The lack of surviving documents and artifacts of colonial African Americans in New England makes it difficult to have a complete understanding of their lives. Examining official documents of the privileged class provides us with some clues to the lives of lesser-represented groups. While few documents remain, tangible evidence of slavery exists all around us, including in the buildings and edifices their labor helped create, such as University Hall on Brown’s campus.22
What did the words slavery and freedom mean to Stephen Hopkins?

The first line of Hopkins' 1766 pamphlet, *The Rights of the Colonies Examined*, reads, “Liberty is the greatest blessing that men enjoy, and slavery is the heaviest curse that human nature is capable of. Those who are governed at the will of another, and who’s property may be taken from them...without their consent...are in the miserable condition of slaves.” Hopkins uses the word slavery as a metaphor for the colonists’ feelings toward the British crown, suggesting that he understood the degrading nature of enslavement. Yet we know from the historical record that Hopkins owned slaves. In the 1760 version of his will, he has made plans to give his slaves to his family members in the event of his death, rather than free them. Why did Hopkins express himself in one way, and act in another? (Graphic: *The Rights of the Colonies Examined*)

How Could Hopkins be a Quaker and still own slaves?

Hopkins' slaveholding was long a point of contention for the Quakers. Minutes from the Smithfield Friends meeting indicate that this issue was debated for nearly seventy years, and that Hopkins’ fellows Quakers placed tremendous pressure upon him to free his slaves. In October 1772, Hopkins chose to manumit—or release—one of his slaves, St. Jago. The document of manumission placed this act within a Christian context:

“The merciful and beneficent goodness of Almighty God by the blessed Gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord: hath by his blessed Spirit thought all [who] obey its Divine Dictates that the keeping [of] any of his rational Creatures in bondage who are capable of taking care of and braving for themselves in a state of freedom, is altogether inconsistent with his Holy and Righteous Will. For these reasons...I the said Stephen Hopkins do manumit, set free, and discharge the said Saint Jago...from every kind of bondage, servitude, and dependence whatsoever.”

Only a year later, however, Hopkins was “put out” of the Society of Friends for refusing to free another slave. Why did Hopkins choose to obey Quaker dictates on one occasion and not another?
By owning slaves, was Stephen Hopkins simply a man of his times? Or did he make a moral choice?

One way to examine this question is to understand the number of people of African descent in Rhode Island during Hopkins’ lifetime. The 1774 Rhode Island census indicates that there were 301 slaves or free Black people in Providence, or about six percent of the total population. By comparison, Newport’s population of people of African descent was thirteen percent, and New York’s was nineteen percent during the same period. On the eve of the American Revolution, six people of African descent resided on Hopkins’ property. Was Hopkins a prominent slave owner?

Was Hopkins a “kind” slave owner?

Between 1760 and 1781, Hopkins changed his will, altering the future of his slaves upon his death. In his 1760 will, Hopkins divides his property, including his slaves, among his family members. To his wife, he chose to give “a Negro Woman named Fibbo, whom I desire she may treat in such a manner that Servitude may not be a Burden to her [and] my Negro Man St. Jago who I desire may be treated in such a manner that his Life may be rendered easy and comfortable.” Twenty years later, Hopkins’ 1781 will gave “to all my Negroes their freedom to take place immediately with respect to those who shall be of age and of the others the males at twenty one and the females at eighteen years of age.” Was Hopkins truly concerned with the welfare of his former slaves? Why didn’t he choose to free his youngest slaves? (Graphics: 1760 & 1781 wills)
Whether or not Hopkins’ contemporaries owned slaves, they were dependent economically and socially on their labor. Are the same issues still relevant today?

In the 18th century, American colonists depended on slavery to provide income (in the form of wages for building and outfitting slave vessels or return on an investment in a slaving voyage) and freedom (to engage in politics, socialize, and purchase commodities). Free slave labor allowed men like Hopkins to rise to prominence, and most people viewed the inequity of slavery as a normal part of life.²⁹

Did Hopkins think about the source of his rum as he shared it with friends? While it is easy to pass judgment, we should consider how our own choices might impact the independence of others. Do you know where your sneakers and jeans come from and who makes them? Is it possible to disconnect ourselves from a modern labor system that exploits the labor of others? Is it as simple as choosing to buy a different brand? How can our own choices impact currently accepted social structures? (Graphics: Cargo for Affrica, sweatshop, Gap bag).

Transition to Keeping Room:

I hope you will continue to think about the complexities of these issues. Your next stop will be down the stairs, through the hallway and into the keeping room.

Keeping Room

This room will be the setting for a discussion of everyday life in colonial Providence, particularly the roll that slaves played in running the Hopkins’ household. As the center of many of the home’s domestic activities, it represents the dependence of the Hopkins’ family on their slaves. It may have been a place where slaves experienced some feeling of independence, free to converse with one another as they carried out chores.
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<td>Cooking equipment, Clothing and sewing supplies, iron and clothesline, Chamber pot</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colonial Food and Meals</td>
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**Introduction**

This space, called the keeping room, served as the hub of daily life in the Hopkins household. This is where food was cooked, clothes washed and dried, and where slaves owned by Hopkins took their meals. This room exhibits evidence of many different activities in progress.

- The majority of the labor performed by Hopkins’ domestic slaves’ occurred in this space. While the amount of work was enormous, dirty, difficult, and often demeaning, it was in this space, separated from the rest of the house, that slaves perhaps had the most autonomy.

- This room has a door that provided direct access to the outside. This allowed slaves the opportunity to come and go, to run errands, and make brief visits to acquaintances without passing through the rooms used by the members of the Hopkins’ family.

- In his 1761 Will, Stephen Hopkins mentioned a female slave named Fibbo. Subsequent documents refer to an adult female slave owned by Hopkins. This person might also have been Fibbo. If so, Fibbo was owned by Hopkins for a span covering more than two decades, including her childhood.

- Fibbo spent a large portion of her young adult life working in this room under the direction of Anna Hopkins, performing many domestic tasks. The Hopkins’ younger slaves might have helped Fibbo in the keeping room.

- Anna likely would have supervised Fibbo closely, but Anna also had the luxury to delegate work to the multiple slaves owned by Hopkins family. This provided her the time to visit with friends, write letters, socialize in this house, or run errands in town.

- Anna Hopkins would have assumed more work and oversight of preparations for social events within the house, but the majority of the labor still fell upon the slaves.
Q: Based upon the objects in this room, can you find clues as to what Fibbo’s jobs were?

- One of these objects is a chamber pot. Rather than visiting the “necessary” or outhouse, during the night, people used chamber pots. The task of emptying the pots into the privy and cleaning them fell upon the Hopkins’ slaves. The cleaned pots were left in the warm kitchen to dry.

- Monday was the traditional washday in colonial households. Fibbo would have used a harsh lye-based soap that damaged her skin and released fumes when it met with water, damaging her eyes and lungs with long-term exposure. The clean laundry was hung to dry outside or in front of the fire. Fibbo then would have used a heavy flat iron on any clothing that needed pressing.

- Tending the fire was very important in colonial times, as it was not only the source of heat, but also necessary for many household activities, such as cooking and ironing. While the fire was banked at the end of the day’s chores, a slave probably slept in this room to tend to the embers and relight the fire in the morning. While the Hopkins family slept on feather beds, the slave had a thin mattress or perhaps a simple bed of blankets.

- The table was a general workspace for Fibbo’s chores and was moved around the room to accommodate specific tasks, such as ironing, cooking, and pickling or salting food to preserve it. If the table was in use, as it often was, meals were taken at any available space in the keeping room. Unheated second floor rooms often served as larders for winter food storage.

- In 1774, the town census listed one black male under the age the Hopkins’ household. Was this Fibbo’s child? Was this a child purchased by Hopkins? While we cannot answer this question with certainty, it is possible that Fibbo would have played a role in his upbringing. Regardless of blood relationship, they would have developed a bond.

- When Stephen and Sarah Hopkins purchased this house in 1743, they had seven children between the ages of four and sixteen. In addition, Anna Hopkins brought three children of her own from a prior marriage into her new home.

- White children and black children often played together under the care of female slaves like Fibbo. As the children grew, their childhood relationship became tainted by an understanding of their differing status in the household, and by the knowledge that Stephen Hopkins could sell any of the slave children as he saw fit, regardless of their opinions and feelings.

- While we cannot know exactly how Fibbo and the rest of the Hopkins slaves felt, we can try to imagine the physical and emotional hardships they had to deal with. Their chores would have emphasized the fact that society considered them to be less important than the Hopkins family members, and that their health and bodies did not deserve the same care because of their color and status as slaves.

- In 1772, after many years of persuasion and pressure from his fellow Quakers, Stephen Hopkins freed St. Jago. Nevertheless, one year later, he was put out of the Society of Friends
for refusing to manumit his remaining slaves, including Fibbo. Was she, and the other slaves that Hopkins refused to free, too important to the running of his house and too valuable for their labors?

Q: How do you think Fibbo might have felt when Hopkins refused to free her?

- Fibbo, perhaps for the first time in her life, glimpsed an opportunity for personal liberty. How much more difficult would it have been to continue to work in this room every day? How much did this highlight for Fibbo the essential difference between slaves and free people: the basic human desire to make choices about their lives?

Transition to “Dying Room”

Female slaves in New England often served as caretakers of sick family members. Fibbo or other domestic slaves assumed the task of nursing Anna and Stephen Hopkins when they were ill, as well as other members of the household. The historical record does not tell us whether Fibbo eventually received her freedom. Perhaps she still was a slave in this household when Stephen died in this small room next to the kitchen.

“Dying Room”

The “Dying Room” represents Hopkins at the end of his life, as incapacitated from illness. The storyline stresses Hopkins’ evolving dependency on his slaves, and his enduring public legacy. Artifacts will be used to humanize Hopkins and an abstract video montage will present representational images from Hopkins’ life, as if it were passing before his (and the viewer’s) eyes.

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<td>Hopkins at the end of his life in a fragile and incapacitated state, highlighting respective roles of dependence</td>
<td>Stephen Hopkins, Enslaved persons</td>
<td>Bed, Chamber pot, video “life” montage</td>
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Introduction:

The last room on our tour is also the last room that Stephen Hopkins occupied in this house. It’s the room where he died. When Hopkins signed his final will in 1781, he still owned at least six slaves. Some of them were children.

- In September 1776, Hopkins’ continued ill health, which included a form of palsy or tremor, compelled him to resign from Continental Congress and return to his home in Rhode Island. He completely withdrew from public service about 1780. Stephen Hopkins died on July 13, 1785, in this room at the age of 78. It is said he retained full possession of his faculties to the end.
• According to Hopkins’ 1785 Probate Inventory, this room contained a feather bed, linens, pillows and blankets at the time of his death. Given the luxury of these items—especially compared to those in the slaves’ chamber—it is logical to conclude that Stephen Hopkins died in this room.

• It was common practice in the 18th century to have a bed near the keeping room, to serve as a birthing or sick room, depending on the needs of the family. This room was kept warm by the hearth, and it was conveniently near the center of the house’s domestic activities, where the Hopkins family and their slaves prepared Hopkins’s food and comforts.

• This room has been set up according to Hopkins’ probate inventory in the way it might have looked at the end of his life.

• The items in this room had come to define this last stage in Hopkins’ life: a bed and a chamber pot. Hopkins may have spent his life building his fortune and political career, but now he was reduced to perhaps his most vulnerable state. He was dependent on people to care for him and to help him with the basic necessities, like eating and washing, every day.

• Hopkins was familiar with the vulnerability that comes with death. He had outlived two wives and five children. Hopkins’ second wife, Anna, died in 1782 leaving him especially dependent on his slaves for basic necessities.

• For Hopkins’ slaves, this final stage of his meant the added responsibilities of maintaining their owner’s comfort and basic needs. They brought him food, changed his bedding, and emptied his chamber pot. Bedridden, Hopkins’ increased dependence on his slaves may have given them a feeling of empowerment and control.

• It is uncertain how Hopkins felt about the institution of slavery by the time of his death. According to his 1781 will, he wished to manumit slaves who had reached adulthood, but younger slaves needed to wait. Two of his slaves, Bonner and Primus, did not become free until two years after their master’s death. During this period, they were owned by someone else, as Hopkins failed to specify their fate until they became of age.

• Imagine the uncertainty and upheaval in the lives of Hopkins’ slaves near the time of his death, as their roles within the household shifted dramatically. Imagine the thoughts of the younger slaves and of their parents, uncertain of their children’s fate upon Hopkins’ death. The destruction of slave families was a reality under chattel bondage. Hopkins understood the grief brought on by the loss of loved ones. Did he equate his own suffering with that of his slaves?

• Moses Brown—the antislavery activist of the Brown family—mentioned in a letter that he sat with Hopkins a few nights before his death. It is interesting to speculate about their final conversation between Stephen Hopkins and Moses Brown. Did Brown try to convince Hopkins to manumit his remaining slaves? Did they debate the system of slavery in general? Or was he simply there to comfort a dying friend?

• Despite being a self-taught man, Stephen Hopkins received many accolades in his life. With John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, he is regarded as a commanding figure in the cause of
liberty. He used his intellect and his influence to fight for American independence. But at his death, he was completely dependent on the enslaved persons whose labor allowed him to pursue a successful political and business career.

- Details of his funeral procession and eulogy were published in the Providence newspapers:

  "A vast assemblage of persons, consisting of judges of the courts, the president, professors and students of the college, together with the citizens of the town, and inhabitants of the state, followed the remains of this eminent man to his resting place in the grave."

  There was no mention of the slaves who supported and cared for him through his long career and at the end of his life.

- As Hopkins lay dying in this room, we can only speculate about his last thoughts, his regrets, his joys, his sorrows.

Q: What do you think he saw in the faces of loved ones and slaves who surrounded his bed?
Endnotes


2 Antoinette F. Downing, Early Homes of Rhode Island (Richmond, VA, 1937).


9 Nylander, 248.


13 Foster, Stephen Hopkins.

14 Ibid, 97-98.


17 Foster, *Stephen Hopkins*.

18 Smith, *After the Revolution*, 60.

19 Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March 1776, collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

20 Stephen Hopkins’ Will, 1760.

21 Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March 1776.


24 St. Jago manumission, Courtesy of Seth Keller, Inc.


27 Stephen Hopkins Will, 1760.

28 Stephen Hopkins Will, 1781.

29 Smith, 140-153.

30 Nylander, 130.


32 Ibid, 97.