ENSLAVED LABOR

and the Making of the
Nightingale-Brown House
Rhode Islanders played a central role in the American slave trade during the 1700s. A total of about one thousand slave-trading voyages sailed from this small state to the coast of Africa, then to the West Indies, in what has been called the triangular trade. The slave trade was a key component in the growth of wealth in Rhode Island, but even the “middling sort”—artisans, shopkeepers, and skilled laborers and tradesmen—invested in shares of a slaving voyage or purchased an enslaved laborer to assist in their shops and stores.

Between 1700 and 1750, the enslaved population in Rhode Island grew faster than the white population. In 1755, African-descended people constituted 11.5% of the Rhode Island population and about 9% of the population of Providence.

Beginning in the early 1700s, slavery came under attack in Rhode Island, led by the Society of Friends (Quakers). In 1783, Quaker Moses Brown introduced a gradual emancipation bill making all children born to enslaved persons free at 18 years of age if female and 21 years of age if male. The bill also removed barriers to individual manumission.

Gradually the number of people enslaved in Rhode Island diminished. The first Federal census in 1790—two years before Joseph Nightingale commissioned the construction of this house—recorded nearly a thousand people enslaved in Rhode Island. By 1820, there were 48. In 1842, a new state constitution made slavery illegal in Rhode Island.
The Nightingale family was part of a closely connected community of families that formed trading partnerships, invested in joint ventures, and frequently intermarried. Supporting this network of merchant families and businesses was a small army of enslaved laborers. The historical record yields a limited amount of information about enslaved people in the household of Joseph Nightingale, but we know that he owned enslaved people who resided in his home on Water Street from 1770 through 1791, and we can be reasonably certain that some of them moved with Joseph’s family into his new mansion on Benefit Street in 1792.

Slavery and
JOSEPH NIGHTINGALE

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The 1782 Rhode Island Census provides some details about enslaved people in the Nightingale household. At that time, Joseph’s household included two “mulatto” males under age 16 and one between 22 and 50; two black males between 16 and 22; three black males between 22 and 50; and one black male “upwards of 50,” for a total of nine black people. The First Federal Census of 1790 and the Providence Census of 1791 recorded four free and five enslaved black people working in his household—again, a total of nine.

John Potter (1716–1787), a wealthy Rhode Island planter, commissioned this portrait of his family. Included is a young boy, almost certainly a slave. The artist painted him lower than the Potters, on the same level as their elaborate tea service. This suggests that they included him in the painting as a possession and a status symbol, rather than as a member of the family.

Courtesy of the Newport Historical Society, Estate of E. L. Winters, 53.3.
In 1789, Joseph Nightingale and John Innes Clark financed a slaving voyage, which led to the sale of seventy-eight captives in Havana the following year. A View of the Entrance of the Harbour of the Havana, 1768.

In 1783, Moses Brown heard reports that his friends John Clark and Joseph Nightingale were intending to dispatch a ship to Africa. The result was this letter, recounting Brown’s experience with the disastrous voyage of the Sally and begging his friends not to repeat his mistake. Had the Sally never sailed, he wrote, “I should have been preserved from an Evil, which has given me the most uneasiness, and has left the greatest impression and stain upon my own mind of any, if not all my other conduct in life...” Nightingale and Clark elected not to heed the advice. Their ship, the Prudence, sailed for Africa a short time later.

Courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society. RHi X17 3911

In 1789, Joseph Nightingale and John Innes Clark financed a slaving voyage, which led to the sale of seventy-eight captives in Havana the following year. A View of the Entrance of the Harbour of the Havana, 1768.

Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.
Clark and Nightingale, the business Joseph founded with John Innes Clark, owned at least two enslaved people, and a third apparently worked for them as a store clerk. Clark and Nightingale also profited from two slaving voyages. In October 1784, the partners and three other Providence merchants sent the brig *Prudence* to the African coast. The *Prudence* boarded 88 African captives and arrived in Georgia nine and a half months later. The 79 captives who survived the grueling Middle Passage debarked and began a life of enslavement. Five years later, Clark and Nightingale underwrote a second slaving voyage, this time as sole owners. The *Providence* boarded 87 African captives and debarked 78 survivors in Havana in July 1790. About one year later, Joseph Nightingale began construction of his new home, financed partially from the proceeds of these voyages.

This 1758 painting by John Greenwood, called *Sea Captains Carousing in Surinam*, depicts a group of Rhode Island ship captains in a tavern amidst African slaves. Of the ten men in the painting who have been identified, six were future trustees of the College of Rhode Island, today Brown University, and two became governor of Rhode Island.

*John Greenwood, American, 1727–1792; Sea Captains Carousing in Surinam, c.1752–58; oil on bed ticking; 37 3/4 x 75 inches; Saint Louis Art Museum, Museum Purchase 256:1948.*
In 1792, Joseph Nightingale moved his family into the elegant mansion built for him on Benefit Street. There is no reason to believe that he would have reduced his household staff upon moving into a more spacious house. It is likely that the same five enslaved and four free black people who resided with the family on Water Street moved with them to Benefit Street.

Just five years later, John Innes Clark reported the sudden and “melancholy death of my late worthy Friend & Partner, who expired in an apoplectic fit on Friday morning between 9 & 10 O’clock without the least complaint or even a groan.” There is no record of who took ownership of his slaves, except for the two owned by the firm, Nimble and Joseph, who were manumitted by Clark in January of 1798.

Clark and Nightingale advertised a variety of goods and supplies available at their shop on Water Street in Providence including “articles of West-India Produce”, likely derived from slave labor. The firm owned or employed at least three enslaved persons.

Alice Pelham Banniter painted this watercolor of “Mr. Nightingale’s House at Providence, Rhode Island” around 1802 while she was a student of Archibald Robertson at his Colombian Academy of Painting in New York.

The so-called Clark and Nightingale Block is perhaps misnamed since the oldest section, to the right in this 1958 photograph of the rear of the building, was likely built a few years after Joseph Nightingale’s death. Located a short distance from Clark’s and Nightingale’s homes on Benefit Street, it probably served as a warehouse and retail store.

**Slavery and the NIGHTINGALE MANSION**

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What happened to the enslaved and formerly enslaved people who identified themselves with the surname “Nightingale”? Several appear in censuses, legal documents, and other sources, but the record is sparse. Their stories are an important part of the history of this house, and their names should be remembered.

**THE ENSLAVED PEOPLE**

**BRISTOL NIGHTINGALE** was free and living with six other people according to the 1790 census, possibly operating a rooming house. He married Martha Monday in 1808 and Martha Carter in 1810.

**QUAM NIGHTINGALE** purchased his freedom from Clark & Nightingale in July 1790, and was living with one other person, perhaps his wife.

While enslaved, **POLLY NIGHTINGALE** was treated in the Providence smallpox hospital in 1776. She married Samuel Greene in 1793.

While enslaved, **CUDGE NIGHTINGALE** worked for Clark & Nightingale as a clerk in their retail shop. He was a free man by 1803, identified as a “labourer” in Scituate, Massachusetts. He maintained contacts in Providence, where he purchased household supplies of sugar, coffee, tea, and liquor.

**JOSHUA NIGHTINGALE** achieved his freedom sometime before 1806, and he made a living as a mariner and laborer.

**RANDALL NIGHTINGALE** was free by 1811, and he worked as a mariner.

**JOSEPH NIGHTINGALE**, identified as a “mulatto,” was freed by the Providence Town Council in 1798 after the death of Joseph Nightingale. He married a woman named Sarah, but the marriage did not last. In 1799, Joseph published a newspaper notice disavowing Sarah’s debts. In 1805, he married Olive Mancy.

**NIMBLE NIGHTINGALE** was emancipated in 1798 along with Joseph. His 1793 marriage to Candice Greene was recorded by the First Congregational Society, of which he was a member. He worked for the Nightingale family unloading ships from 1807 to 1809. The 1810 Federal Census includes Nimble in a household of three, possibly with Candice and a child. In 1826, Nimble’s death was reported in two newspapers, which identified him as a “professor of the Christian Religion.”
When Nicholas Brown, Jr., purchased the Nightingale mansion on Benefit Street in 1814, he too brought with him a family history steeped in the business of slavery. Most of the commercial interests that made the Browns the most powerful merchant family in Providence had been connected in one way or another with the slave trade. But by 1814, the slave trade had become illegal, and slavery itself was quickly disappearing. There would be no enslaved people living in Nicholas Brown’s new home on Benefit Street.

The parlor contains paneling original to the house, and floorboards may have been trod upon by the Nightingale household. There is little else left from the Nightingale family or from the enslaved and free black people who labored here. The house itself stands as a monument to their labors, as well as to the institution, slavery, that helped finance its construction. It is the responsibility of the current inhabitants of the Nightingale-Brown House to remember the names and stories of these “black Nightingales.”

The parlor of the Nightingale-Brown House retains wall paneling from Joseph Nightingale’s period of ownership.

**REMEMBER**

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**Joseph Nightingale’s BUSINESS OF SLAVERY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1747</td>
<td>Joseph Nightingale is born in Pomfret, Connecticut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1751–52</td>
<td>The Nightingale family moves to Providence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1769</td>
<td>Joseph Nightingale co-founds the firm of Clark and Nightingale with John Innes Clark</td>
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<tr>
<td>1774</td>
<td>The Rhode Island census lists two “Indians” and four “Blacks” in Joseph’s Nightingale’s household</td>
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<tr>
<td>1782</td>
<td>Joseph Nightingale is recorded as having nine people of color working in his household on Water Street</td>
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<tr>
<td>1783</td>
<td>Rhode Island passes a gradual emancipation law</td>
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<tr>
<td>1784</td>
<td>Clark and Nightingale invest in the slaving voyage of the brig Prudence, resulting in the enslavement of 79 Africans (nine others died on board).</td>
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<td>Quam Nightingale purchases his freedom from Clark and Nightingale</td>
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<td>1791</td>
<td>The Providence census identifies five enslaved people living in Joseph Nightingale’s household on Water Street</td>
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<tr>
<td>1791–92</td>
<td>Joseph Nightingale’s mansion on Benefit Street is built</td>
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<tr>
<td>1797</td>
<td>Death of Joseph Nightingale</td>
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<tr>
<td>1798</td>
<td>Nimble Nightingale and Joseph Nightingale, “servants of John Innes Clark and the late Joseph Nightingale” are freed by Clark</td>
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<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>Joseph Nightingale’s son, John Clark Nightingale, finances the slaving voyage of the brig Ida, resulting in the deaths on board of 69% of the 162 captive Africans</td>
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<tr>
<td>1814</td>
<td>Nicholas Brown, Jr., purchases the former Nightingale mansion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1842</td>
<td>The new Rhode Island Constitution makes slavery illegal in the state</td>
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The information in this pamphlet is derived from “Black Labor in the Making of the Nightingale-Brown House” (2018), by Joanne Pope Melish. The report was commissioned by the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage.

Additional research and writing was undertaken by Sophie Don, Zelin (William) Pei, Yiru Zhang, and Ron Potvin.

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Arielle Julia Brown and ChE Ware of the CSSJ’s Black Spatial Relics project provided inspiration for this project.