

School of Humanities

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Gary Clayton
Concord Community Preservation Committee
141 Keyes Road, 1st Floor
Concord MA 01742

August 13, 2010

Dear Mr. Clayton,

I write in enthusiastic support of the Drinking Gourd Project's initiative to transform Caesar Robbins' house, currently located on Bedford Street, into the Caesar Robbins Educational Center, which will be located across the street from the Old North Bridge.

I was born and raised in Lincoln and graduated from Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School. My education in the Lincoln school system was excellent and allowed me to go onto Yale (BA 1986) and Rutgers (PhD 1996). But my elementary and high school education never covered slavery in the North, much less in my backyard. I knew Concord only as the birthplace of liberty and literature. In graduate school, when I finally read Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, I was surprised to learn that former slaves had once lived near where Thoreau built his small cabin. I was unaware that slavery had shaped the local landscape I thought I knew so well.

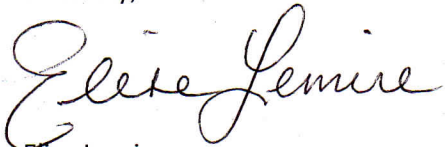
Last year, after a decade of research, I published *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). I discovered Concord was a slave town for the first 150 years of its incorporation and that after emancipation slaves were shunted onto Concord's least fertile and most geographically remote land, setting the stage for the largely white suburb we know today. But I also discovered numerous inspiring stories about incredible fortitude and endurance. Slaves went to great lengths to maintain family ties in the face of cruel separation, often at birth, and to maintain as much autonomy as they could, sometimes purposefully courting their owners' wrath in order to insure their owners would abandon them. These stories don't shed a flattering light on Concord's famous patriots and I thus wasn't sure how *Black Walden* would be received in Concord, a town which for so many years has capitalized financially and culturally on its role in forging American freedom.

I need not have worried. As evidenced by the attendance at the many fine events hosted by the Drinking Gourd Project, in particular the town discussion they hosted after a screening of *Traces of the Trade*, and the recent vote at town meeting to fund moving the Robbins house, the citizens of Concord

are eager and ready to learn how slavery and its aftermath shaped their storied town. The town's commitment to an educational center indicates unprecedented local determination that school-age children will no longer be fed the sugar-coated version of the nation's origins that I received as a child.

Mount Vernon, Monticello, and several other key colonial and early national sites have already incorporated the history of slavery into their educational programming and preservation efforts. The Drinking Gourd Project is willing to ensure that Concord will follow suit. The Caesar Robbins Educational Center is an opportunity for the town of Concord to once again make history by putting the story of slavery on the scene where the nation began. I urge you to continue your support of their initiatives.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Elise Lemire". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial "E" and a long, sweeping tail.

Elise Lemire

Associate Professor of Literature