

Thomas Dugan: An African American Life in 1820s Concord History and Approach

Thomas Dugan's life

Thomas Dugan (1747-1827) was an African American man born almost thirty years before the start of the American Revolution and was enslaved in Virginia. We do not know how he came to be free, but he arrived in Concord by about 1791 and lived as a free man for the rest of his life. While the beginning of his life is undocumented, by carefully studying his probate inventory (a list of his possessions created at his death), we can catch a glimpse into his life in Concord.

Dugan was a yeoman, a person who owns and farms a plot of land. The Dugan property in 1827 included a house, barn, and seven acres of land valued at \$300. The value of his property indicates that Dugan was a good farmer; he was a land owner – fewer than half of his Concord contemporaries, white or black, could say the same – and he died without any debts, rare at the time when surviving on credit was normal. Thus, Dugan's life sheds light into the life of middle class citizens in the 1820s, but also highlights the lives of some free African Americans who were able to own property.

He was not rich, but he also was not poor. He owned ceramic tableware, a featherbed, a looking glass (mirror) and a cow, but also owned many less expensive earthenware pots, simple furniture, and farming equipment. The goods he owned were worth \$32.30, and his land, house, and barn were worth \$300. In 1827 a skilled laborer might earn \$1 a day; a common laborer earned about 50-75 cents a day. Most Concord farms were about sixty acres in size, which was enough to support a family. About half of Concord's heads of households owned land at this time. Dugan's seven acres would have been enough to supply a grazing meadow in the summer and hay to cut for his cow in the winter. It would not have been enough to grow all the food he and his family needed so most likely, he did other work as well.

At Dugan's death in 1827 he was survived by his second wife, Jenny Parker Dugan, and seven children between the ages of 33 and 11. His first wife, Catherine Porter Dugan, died in 1803. It is not clear which of his children were living in Dugan's house off Old Marlboro Road in Concord when he died. In his will, Dugan left his estate to his "beloved wife Jenny Dugan," with \$1 each to three sons and two daughters, and \$10 each to his two youngest sons.

The written sources on Thomas Dugan include his probate inventory, his last will and testament, a newspaper ad, an obituary, and a newspaper article from 63 years after his death. The article from 1890 recalled him as an expert grafter of apple trees, who "did much to advance the farming interests in Concord; he was industrious and a peace maker." Thomas Dugan's mark also survives, which means that Thomas Dugan could not write and most likely could not read.

Notes on the objects and images used

The objects in the images provided are from the Concord Museum collection and have local histories. The gun belonged personally to Thomas Dugan. The house pictured (The Robbins House), and the looking glass also belonged to black Concordians. Often, the objects preserved and exhibited at museums are those that belonged to wealthy or famous people, so the Concord Museum is fortunate to own these rare surviving objects from local African Americans who are not well known to history.

In many inventories from this period, including Thomas Dugan's, similar items are listed together, suggesting that the appraisers may have rearranged things for convenience when the inventories were taken. The museum's exhibition grouped objects as they appear in the inventory, which is not the way they would have been arranged in Dugan's home. For instance, the farming items in the images would have been kept in Dugan's barn rather than the house.

Teaching Approach

The Concord Museum designs all educational programs around object-based learning. The museum uses objects as primary sources just as many students are trained to use documents. Students can learn a lot about a person or time period just by looking carefully at an object or grouping of objects. Looking closely at objects can often be less intimidating than other forms of primary sources and offer areas for personal connections between a student's own life and life in the past. This approach requires asking questions that allow students to make open-ended observations about the object(s) and then to make sure they back up assumptions with visual evidence. Questions such as "What do you notice?" and following up with "What do you SEE that makes you say that?" work well.