

Teaching American History

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Summer Session 2008

Book Review of

*Sarah's Long Walk: The Free Blacks of Boston and How Their Struggle for*

*Equality Changed America*

By Stephen Kendrick and Paul Kendrick

Submitted by

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Much of the history regarding the battle to end segregation in the schools of the United States has been framed in the context of court cases. Most notably of course is the landmark Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. But the very essence of *Brown*, as authors Stephen and Paul Kendrick remind us in their introduction to *Sarah's Long Walk: The Free Blacks of Boston and How Their Struggle for Equality Changed America*, was about reversing the decision rendered in another monumental court case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The separate but equal doctrine codified in that case would engrain with permanence racial segregation into all facets of daily life. In writing the decision in *Plessy*, Judge Henry Brown would lean heavily on an obscure court case from his home state of Massachusetts involving a five year old girl's daily trek to school. It is this case, *Roberts v. The City of Boston*, and the people it involved that the Kendricks build their book around.

Fortunately for the reader, the book is about much more than Benjamin Roberts fight to enroll his daughter Sarah in any of the five white schools she passed each day on her way to the all black Smith School. According to the authors, *Sarah's Long Walk* "is a story about a remarkable generation of activists who, with little wealth, social standing, and political influence, changed our nation". It is also about a community not easily imagined today, and the city of Boston, the only place in the country in which it could exist. The authors see the *Roberts* case as a key component in our nation's history. They contend the case comprises "the precise moment when one black community realized it was free in more than name." This realization and the activity it spurred serve as perhaps the first steps along the interminable road to civil rights.

In telling the story of this community and its residents, the Kendricks expose the lives of the story's main characters in absorbing detail. Chapter one begins with a look at the lawyer Benjamin Roberts hired to take his case. We are introduced to attorney Robert Morris at a time in his life when he's struggling to gain a foothold in the Boston legal community. We find him in conflict with himself as he prepares for his first case, the first in the country in which a black lawyer would argue a case in front of a jury. From here the authors weave fabrics of Morris's childhood and adolescence into a back-story that convincingly shows how Morris became the man he was on the eve of his first case. We see a young man working hard to live down a degrading association with the legend of his grandfather, a slave named Cumono, who died under mysterious circumstances. The authors paint Salem, the city of Morris's birth, as "wrestling with the notion of integrated schools" and thus rich with opportunities for young Robert to experience "the brutal realities" associated with the struggle for "equal school rights". The events in Salem may have made more sense to Morris because his father Yorkshire had instilled in him at an early age that "the idea of the inferiority of any person" was never to be believed. Morris was exposed to Salem's elite through his job as a waiter, a skill he learned from his father, at one time the city's best. It was through this work that Morris drew the attention of Ellis Gray Loring, a Boston lawyer from a prestigious family who would serve as Morris's mentor.

The early life of Benjamin Roberts is also exposed in such a way as to make it easier to understand his actions later in life. His mother's father, James Easton, was a veteran of the American Revolution who was keenly aware that his military service did nothing to elevate his standing in his community. Easton took on the church much as

Roberts would take on the Boston school system. Refusing to sit in his church's "Negro gallery", he instead purchased a pew for his family in the section of the church reserved for whites. An "extremely educated and eloquent man", Easton valued education deeply and even opened his own school. The other side of Robert's family was equally accomplished, with his father and uncle both becoming published authors. Robert's himself would become a writer, penning articles that bemoaned the dearth of opportunities, economic and otherwise, available to African Americans. Carrying on "his family's legacy of activism and self-determination" placed him in conflict with others in the abolitionist movement. Boldly starting his own newspaper in 1838 put him in direct competition with William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*. The authors contend that Roberts's uncompromising style could have led to his disillusionment with Boston's abolitionist community, causing him to leave the city for some years.

Roberts resurfaced and proceeded with what he deemed a "practical experiment". The experiment, attempting to enroll his young daughter in an all white school, failed miserably when Sarah was denied entrance to one school and removed from another by the police. Presented with the impetus for a lawsuit, Roberts contacts Morris and the case of *Roberts v. The City of Boston* was formed. The Kendricks underscore the difficulties Morris faced by quoting a Massachusetts judge familiar with the case. According to Judge Elijah Adlow, there was absolutely "no legal precedent, no stature, no common law tradition that required desegregation where the issue of equality was raised." Add to this an opposing council steeped in his opposition to "all things abolitionist", coupled with the fact that the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment was not yet a reality, and it is no surprise Morris lost the case.

In the coverage of the appeal in the case we are introduced to the eloquent and aloof Charles Sumner, who takes on the case at no charge. The Kendricks expose Sumner as much more than Ralph Waldo Emerson's confidant or as the victim of a vicious beating at the hands of a fellow senator, as he is often remembered. Here we see Sumner as a principled young attorney whose logic foreshadowed the tenets of both the *Brown* decision and the contemporary ideals espoused by proponents of affirmative action. Making an argument based more on principles and morals rather than legal precedent, Sumner not only questioned the legality of discrimination based on race, but went so far as to suggest that a lack of diversity in the classroom "injures" all races. But it was his translation of a French phrase into English that the Kendricks cite as "a pinnacle in American law". Sumner's call for "equality before the law" would be lauded by the judge in the case, Lemuel Shaw, but the praise would ring hollow as Shaw eschewed the true meaning of the phrase in writing of his decision, which "shocked and incensed" Benjamin Roberts. Instead, Shaw's decision would provide the genesis of the "separate but equal" doctrine, which the Kendricks see as "one of the most successful and useful legal concepts ever fashioned". Of course, it was a successful and useful tool for those who sought to keep the races segregated.

The Kendricks are to be commended for not only breathing life into the *Roberts* case and the characters it involved, but also to the conflicts they faced. In chapter seven, *A Gathering Tempest*, the authors trace the fractures of the first rift in Boston's black community regarding school desegregation. The battle is framed around Benjamin Roberts and two cousins, confusingly enough named Thomas Paul and Thomas Paul Smith. Roberts is seen as an integrationist, while the cousins are fierce proponents of

keeping the Smith School exclusively black. As with others in the book, all parties in the conflict are shown to have arrived at their positions on the matter through bitter experience. Both Thomas Paul and his cousin attended integrated schools and found the experience anything but constructive. Roberts grew up in a family that believed receiving the best education possible was a vital instrument in combating discrimination.

The Kendricks are at their best here, recreating the ensuing battle of political wills waged by these strong personalities. Thomas Paul Smith appears particularly adept at being duplicitous in his pursuit of political ends. He once placed Roberts in the incongruous position of having his name attached to a petition praising the all black Smith School at the same time he was vehemently denouncing segregated schools. The battle became personal, with Roberts referring to Smith as a “young ambitious bigot”. For his part, Smith accused Roberts of caring about the situation in Boston’s school only because of monetary reasons related to his pending court case. In the end followers of Smith could hardly claim to be victorious, but his passion for self imposed segregation, and the manner in which he spoke on the issue, makes for engaging reading.

The city of Boston is also exposed in all its paradoxical glory on the pages of *Sarah’s Long Walk*. It was only in antebellum Boston where William Lloyd Garrison could foment anti-slavery fervor with his speeches and newspaper. And only in Boston could a mob of vigilant black men threaten slave catchers with death, or in another instance (with the help of attorney Robert Morris), break a fugitive slave named Shadrach Minkins out of the court house and off to relative safety. However, it was also in Boston where racial segregation was firmly entrenched and maintained to “the point of violence”. We see the patriarchs of the city living on one side of the hill as they lamented

the citizens of the other side of the slope, which they crudely referred to as “Nigger Hill”. The intricate maze of alleys, courts and side streets that comprised the north slope of Beacon Hill may have provided escaped slaves with the means to avoid capture, but it was a key ingredient in the recipe for social disaster in the eyes of the Brahmins.

Ultimately, the authors view antebellum Boston in the same light as they see the city today: “a harsh city where its people are, if not strictly segregated, at the very least still encouraged to be segmented and separate as possible”. The Kendricks cite Anthony J. Lucas’s masterwork *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families* as a source from which we can glean a better understanding of Boston’s tenuous race relations. *Sarah’s Long Walk* serves as a companion piece to Lucas’s study in more ways than one. Not only do they both deal with school segregation issues in the city of Boston, but both books do so by focusing on the lives of those deeply involved in the drama. The manner in which ordinary people react to circumstances they feel to be extraordinary carries the narrative in both books.

*Sarah’s Long Walk* may leave some readers with more questions than answers. The authors are not to be faulted for this. The historical record is essentially bereft of the lives led by the people the Kendricks introduce. While benefiting from the recent release of an assortment of Robert Morris’s papers, their task had to be nonetheless daunting. To pull it off, they ask the reader to assume or imagine what certain characters would have felt or thought. At times this is not difficult to do, as when the authors state “one imagines that Morris” would be well suited to embrace the challenges facing him. The Kendricks spent a good deal of chapter one chronicling the events and moments of Morris’s formative years. However, their speculation as to the emotional damage suffered

by four-year old Sarah's removal from school at the hands of the police does not consider one critical question. If "it is painful to pause and feel the true human cost, the shock and the shame, of that moment", as the authors contend, then it's necessary to ask whose behavior we find shocking and shameful. Beyond the actions of the Boston School Committee, the police and others who found Sarah's presence in the Otis School unacceptable, the culpability of Benjamin Roberts in his daughter's emotional trauma is ignored. For all of his dogged determination and ideals, did Roberts put his cause above the well being of his daughter? In the pursuit of his "practical experiment", it is very easy "for one to imagine" the untold damage incurred by young Sarah as her father repeatedly attempted to enroll in schools where she was not welcomed. The Kendricks leave this possibility untouched.

Because *Sarah's Long Walk* generates so many questions it lends itself nicely to use in the classroom. Teachers should have little difficulty forming lessons to fit the Historical Thinking Standards developed by the National Center for History in the Schools. The first standard, *Chronological Thinking*, seeks to develop in students the ability identify patterns in history and apply them in a way that demonstrates historical continuity and change. Many of the issues raised in *Sarah's Long Walk*, including "the debate over integration versus self-imposed segregation in the name of community strength", are still topical today. Standard three call for students to engage in historical analysis and interpretation as it applies to the role of the individual in history. The Kendrick's book does not suffer from a lack of fascinating individuals whose motives and actions could be explored.

Perhaps this is the best attribute of *Sarah's Long Walk*, the fact that it introduces us several common people who acted in uncommon ways when faced with challenges. The authors of course do not ignore the better known figures in the narrative (William Lloyd Garrison, Sumner, Fredrick Douglas), but it is the lesser known characters of the story that keeps the interest of the reader.

There is Prince Hall and Maria Stewart, early leaders in Boston's African American community. We meet David Walker, a free-born man from a slave state who in 1829 authored an *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, a document of African American liberation that impacted many in America's black community in much the same manner as Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* influenced white colonists. There is William Cooper Nell, tireless in his pursuit of equality and someone who could be considered William Lloyd Garrison's right-hand man. It is the bravery and endurance of these ordinary people and others like them which allows *Sarah's Long Walk* to succeed.