

Searching for Sarah: Black Girlhood, Education, and the Archive

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Roberts v. City of Boston is a well-known legal case in the history of US education.¹ In 1847, the Boston School Committee denied Sarah C. Roberts, a five-year-old African American girl, admission to the public primary school closest to her home. She was instead ordered to attend the all-black Abiel Smith School, about a half-mile walk from her home.² In March 1848, Sarah's father, Benjamin, sued the city of Boston for denying Sarah the right to attend the public school closest to her home. The case wound its way through the courts, eventually reaching the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. In 1850, Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw ruled in favor of the city of Boston, affirming that the Boston School Committee had "not violated any principle of equality, inasmuch as they have provided a school with competent instructors for the colored children, where they enjoy equal advantages of instruction with those enjoyed by the white children."³ And thus, the doctrine of separate but equal was born in Massachusetts.

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¹ *Roberts v. Boston*, 59 Mass. (5 Cush.) 198 (1850). See, for instance, Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 178-79; Davison M. Douglas, *Jim Crow Moves North: The Battle over Northern School Segregation, 1865-1954* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 12-60; and Hilary Moss, *Schooling Citizens: The Struggle for African American Education in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 164-89.

² Some sources state that Sarah C. Roberts was six years old at the time, but based on genealogical records, Sarah was born in September 1842, so she was five years old when her father sued the city of Boston in March 1848.

³ "Sarah C. Roberts vs. The City of Boston" in *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts*, vol. 5, ed. Luther S. Cushing (Boston: Little, Brown, 1853), 203.

Shaw's ruling in *Roberts v. City of Boston* was significant both in the long term, with subsequent legal cases such as *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and in the short term, given its impact on African American activists. In 1896, the United States Supreme Court issued a decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* upholding the constitutionality of racial segregation, citing the doctrine of separate but equal.⁴ It would take a little over a century to abolish this doctrine. Even in the 1850s, the decision in the *Roberts* case was a major blow to African American activists who had been fighting for educational equality in Massachusetts since the late eighteenth century. Continued protest by these activists eventually led to the passage of an 1855 law directing all Massachusetts public schools to integrate.⁵ Those directly involved in the *Roberts* case were impacted, including Sarah's parents, Benjamin and Adeline Roberts; Sarah's siblings; and Sarah herself.

Much of the existing literature on this case completely loses sight of Sarah.⁶ How did she feel about this case that her father had initiated on her behalf? And what difference, if any, did this case make in her life? The leading book on educational equality and African American activism in antebellum Boston is Stephen Kendrick and Paul Kendrick's *Sarah's Long Walk: The Free Blacks of Boston and How Their Struggle for Equality Changed America*.⁷ The book contextualizes the *Roberts* case, profiling leaders such as William C. Nell. But not much information exists about Sarah's life that could begin to answer the questions posed above. Kendrick and Kendrick concluded that Sarah "was and remains a historical tabula rasa."⁸ Such a conclusion provokes even more questions about Sarah as well as the process of

⁴For more on the *Plessy* case, see David W. Bishop, "Plessy v. Ferguson: A Reinterpretation," *Journal of Negro History* 62, no. 2 (April 1977), 125-33; and Steve Luxenberg, *Separate: The Story of Plessy v. Ferguson, and America's Journey from Slavery to Segregation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).

⁵Chapter 256, *Acts and Resolves Passed by the General Court of Massachusetts in the Year 1855* (Boston: William White, Printer to the State, 1855), 674-675.

⁶One notable exception is an article written by George Dargo, "The Sarah Roberts Case in Historical Perspective," *Massachusetts Legal History: Journal of the Supreme Judicial Court Historical Society* 3 (1997), 37-52.

⁷See also, John Daniels, *In Freedom's Birthplace: A Study of the Boston Negroes* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1914); James O. Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979); George A. Levesque, *Black Boston: African American Life and Culture in Urban America, 1750-1860* (New York: Garland, 1994); and Stephen D. Kantrowitz, *More Than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012).

⁸Stephen Kendrick and Paul Kendrick, *Sarah's Long Walk: The Free Blacks of Boston and How Their Struggle for Equality Changed America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 258.

researching the early educational histories of African Americans, women, children, and the poor and working class.

Sarah is not exactly a historical tabula rasa, however. In fact, the case that bears her name makes it clear that there was more to know and learn—not only about black girlhood and education in nineteenth-century Boston but about archival research practices concerning African American children. I began my own quest by first studying the politics of the archive and then hunting down new sources. This essay describes that quest, one that historians and genealogists alike regularly follow. What I uncovered, however, enriches how we read and interpret what we thought we already knew about this case.⁹

I take as my point of departure Kendrick and Kendrick's claim that "only glints and glimmers" of Sarah C. Roberts exist.¹⁰ The fact that only glints and glimmers exist might actually have been deliberate—not just because the archive is a site of contestation over power that determines whose stories are preserved and whose are not, but also because maybe Sarah wanted to leave the *Roberts* case where it was—in the past.¹¹

The Politics of the Archive

My approach to archival research has been informed by decades of scholarship in the fields of African American women's history and slavery studies. As a scholar trained in African American studies, I have read often about the "source problem," which could be defined in a few ways: nontraditional primary sources that other scholars question; a dearth of primary sources on a particular subject; or a trove of sources that, at first glance, seem to reveal little about the subject that interests the scholar.¹² Reading pathbreaking work in the aforementioned fields has shaped my historical thinking and my approach to studying and writing about African American women's and girls' education.¹³

⁹Carl Kaestle's article served as a springboard for this essay. Carl Kaestle, "Standards of Evidence in Historical Research: How Do We Know When We Know?," *History of Education Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (Fall 1992), 361-66.

¹⁰Kendrick and Kendrick, *Sarah's Long Walk*, 257.

¹¹Sarah's possible reticence reminds me of Darlene Clark Hine's concept of the culture of dissemblance, which other scholars have cited to talk about black women's sexuality. See Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1989), 912-20.

¹²For a fascinating article on how to deal with the problem of a trove of sources, see Ula Taylor, "Women in the Documents: Thoughts on Uncovering the Personal, Political, and Professional," *Journal of Women's History* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 187-96.

¹³I remember reading classic texts, such as Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South* (Xenia, OH: Aldine Printing House, 1892); and

I remember in graduate school reading Deborah Gray White's pioneering study *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* in conjunction with her incredibly honest and illuminating essay describing the travails of publishing her research. White faced criticism and rejection not because her sources were insufficient, but because they were not "traditional white sources" like plantation records and southern newspapers.¹⁴ Rather, she drew from hundreds of interviews of formerly enslaved people published by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s. Her commitment to her research and her drive to stay the course inspired me. She is a trailblazer, and emerging scholars like me benefited—I did not have to defend my research question on African American women and education in the nineteenth century.¹⁵

Of course, this question about searching for sources was not new: a whole generation of historians learned and taught others to, in Crystal Feimster's words, "read the silences and against the grain. . . . Sources were not nicely collected in folders filed numerically in cardboard boxes neatly stacked on shelves in some university archive."¹⁶ Moreover there was the reality that archives were violent spaces, erasing and fragmenting the stories of people of color. In *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman's sobering words reverberated: "To read the archive is to enter a mortuary."¹⁷ Given my own interests in nineteenth-century African American women's history and childhood studies, I knew that my research process would require the kind of approach that Feimster had outlined as well as a sensibility that Hartman described. I continued to turn to scholarship in African American

Marion Manola Thompson Wright, *The Education of Negroes in New Jersey* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1941) as well as contemporary monographs, such as Linda M. Perkins, *Fanny Jackson Coppin and the Institute for Colored Youth, 1865-1902* (New York: Garland, 1987); Tera W. Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); and Jacqueline Jones Royster, *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

¹⁴Deborah Gray White, "My History in History," in *Telling Histories: Black Women Historians in the Ivory Tower*, ed. Deborah G. White (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 94.

¹⁵In fact, I felt encouraged after reading Ronald E. Butchart's historiographical essay on African American education and his call for further scholarship on African American girls' and women's education. See, Ronald E. Butchart, "Outthinking and Outflanking the Owners of the World: A Historiography of the African American Struggle for Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (Fall 1988), 333-66.

¹⁶Crystal Feimster, "Not So Ivory: African American Women Historians Creating Academic Communities," in White, *Telling Histories*, 283.

¹⁷Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 17.

women's history and slavery studies as models, not just for argument and storytelling but for methodology, particularly the challenge of writing about a subject with a seemingly thin source base.¹⁸

Once I acknowledged the politics of the archive and then bracketed the "source problem," I felt less constrained and better positioned to rework known written materials, dive into the archive, and see what was there. Lois Brown has long encouraged scholars of nineteenth-century African American literature and history to "read what we have, behold the intimate, value the private that is exhibited in public buildings and private spheres, and make *history bers* in as many ways as we can [emphasis in original]."¹⁹ A similar sentiment emerges in the work of Tara Bynum, who reminds us that searching in an archive for narratives of resistance or even "direct action" is a "present-day misunderstanding or a misguided expectation" of historical actors.²⁰ Both Brown and Bynum not only called for a reorientation toward archival work but also modeled it. I noticed in their scholarship something akin to an idea of *archival optimism*, which engages how racism, sexism, colonialism, and other forms of domination shape archival methods but which also embraces a commitment to reading what is there in archival collections. I adopted this archival optimism as I searched for Sarah.²¹

Searching for Sources

I searched for Sarah by examining documents related to her parents as well as her extended family, and I tracked her marriage records. This

¹⁸I am thinking of recent studies showcasing a brilliant reading and analysis of sources to tell the stories of enslaved African American women. See, for instance, Sydney Nathans, *To Free a Family: The Journey of Mary Walker* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge* (New York: 37 INK/Atria, 2017); Hendrik Hartog, *The Trouble with Minna: A Case of Slavery and Emancipation in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); and W. Caleb McDaniel, *Sweet Taste of Liberty: A True Story of Slavery and Restitution in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹⁹Lois Brown, "Death-Defying Testimony: Women's Private Lives and the Politics of Public Documents," *Legacy* 27, no. 1 (June 2010), 138.

²⁰Tara Bynum, "Cesar Lyndon's Lists, Letters, and a Pig Roast: *A Sundry Account Book*," *Early American Literature* 53, no. 3 (2018), 841.

²¹I will share a few tips here: finding aids may not identify people (of color) in a collection because archivists who processed the collection may not have known that people of color were even mentioned; names of schools did not remain constant so variations in search terms are required; source transcriptions (particularly from newspaper databases) are unreliable and the original must be examined; a Boolean search on Google might uncover newly processed collections that do identify people of color; and antiquarians, at any given point, might be auctioning fascinating material that could be purchased for a nominal fee.

approach neither sped up the research journey nor simplified it; on the contrary, there were quite a few cycles of searching for months, stopping, and then beginning again. Every time, I found an interesting primary source: Sarah's marriage and divorce records, Sarah's father's obituary and then her mother's obituary and will, Sarah's brother William's reflections on his family and even a photo of William in a *Boston Globe* article, and, eventually, Sarah's death record.²² Each document on its own did not reveal much, but taken together, I started to generate new information that demanded a reinterpretation of the *Roberts* case with Sarah at the center.

Kendrick and Kendrick had learned that Sarah resided in New Haven with her then husband, John Casneau, a black ship's steward whom she married in February 1867 at the age of twenty-four in Boston. In the 1879 *New Haven City Directory*, Sarah C. Casneau is listed as a widow living at 39 Lafayette, the same address as her sister Caroline and her brother-in-law Eugene.²³ I conducted research in New Haven and turned up nothing after a months-long, time-consuming, and painstaking investigation. I then retraced my steps, looking for John's death record and will. I learned that he had not died but had moved to Providence, Rhode Island, and remarried. So, what *really* happened? I tracked John in city directories in New Haven and Providence. On a hunch, I examined the New Haven County Superior Court Divorce Files on microfilm and was rewarded when I found the Casneau divorce file. Perhaps when the *New Haven City Directory* was printed, Sarah reported that she was a widow, but legally she was not. In October 1879, John had filed for divorce, citing Sarah's affair with a man named Charles Caesar. The divorce was granted the following month.²⁴ How I wish I had more evidence to understand what else transpired between John and Sarah.

Adultery was a criminal offense in late nineteenth-century Connecticut. In February 1880, both Sarah and Charles Caesar were convicted of fornication and fined.²⁵ At minimum, these records proved that Sarah had resided in or around New Haven and dealt with legal issues. Strangely, however, after multiple searches, I could not find Sarah C. Roberts or Sarah C. Casneau in the 1880 US federal census. Given how often census takers mangled the spelling of Sarah's

²²I did not find these sources in chronological order, though I discuss them here that way for the sake of clarity.

²³*New Haven City Directory* (New Haven, CT: Price, Lee, 1879).

²⁴I thank reference librarian Jeannie Sherman at the Connecticut State Library for helping me locate this file.

²⁵"City Court—Criminal Side—Judge Pardee," (*New Haven, CT*) *Morning Journal and Courier*, Feb. 14, 1880, 4.

married surname, I looked for an approximate spelling. A Sarah Cassanny appears but there were numerous discrepancies: this Sarah was a twenty-three-year-old single black woman born in Connecticut to parents also from Connecticut. Her occupation was listed as washing and ironing.²⁶ Almost none of the data matched Sarah C. Roberts except for the race and name, which was actually a fairly close approximate spelling. In any case, Sarah C. Casneau had an unclaimed letter at the New Haven Post Office in August 1880, which further substantiated that she remained in the city after her divorce and conviction.²⁷

On December 11, 1880, Sarah C. Roberts Casneau married a thirty-five-year-old African American butcher named Charles Dyer.²⁸ The couple resided at her residence on Frank Street in New Haven. Curiously, her age was recorded as twenty-nine-years-old, but that is certainly incorrect as Sarah was born in 1842, not 1851. But all other data matched—name, race, and birthplace. The age discrepancy had to be a clerical error, I decided. It was thrilling, nonetheless, to have learned a little bit more about Sarah.

Unfortunately, her marriage to Charles was an unhappy one. He was arrested, jailed, and fined multiple times for assaulting Sarah—once sometime around June 1881, again around December 1881, and then again in July 1882.²⁹ During the July 1882 incident, he “assault [ed] his wife and kick[ed] her out of doors” and also attacked the police officer who arrested him.³⁰ It is unclear when, where, or if the marriage dissolved, at least legally. A Sarah Dyer was listed in the *New Haven City Directory* from 1882 to 1884 residing at 33 Winter Street, but no records have emerged yet to confirm these entries as Sarah C. Roberts. Hitting the proverbial wall, I revisited the documents related to the Roberts family, specifically Sarah’s father, Benjamin.³¹

²⁶US Census Bureau, Tenth Census of the United States: 1880: Population Schedule, New Haven, Connecticut, roll 105, ED 082, 593D.

²⁷“List of Unclaimed Letters,” (*New Haven, CT*) *Morning Journal and Courier*, Aug. 25, 1880, 4.

²⁸It is not clear what happened to Sarah’s relationship with Charles Caesar. It is unlikely, though, that Charles Caesar and Charles Dyer were the same person.

²⁹“City Court—Judge Studley,” *New Haven (CT) Register*, June 4, 1881, 4; “City Court—Criminal Side—Judge Studley,” (*New Haven, CT*) *Morning Journal and Courier*, Dec. 29, 1881, 4; “Police Notes,” (*New Haven, CT*) *Morning Journal and Courier*, July 8, 1882, 3.

³⁰“Police Notes.”

³¹I also returned to secondary sources, such as Moss, *Schooling Citizens*; John Daniels, *In Freedom’s Birthplace: A Study of Boston Negroes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914); and Arthur O. White, “Blacks and Education in Antebellum Massachusetts: Strategies for Social Mobility” (EdD diss., State University of New York at Buffalo, 1971), to understand earlier interpretations of the *Roberts* case and Benjamin F. Roberts’s role.

Long after his death from epilepsy in September 1881, Benjamin Roberts was remembered as a successful African American printer who “made the final and winning fight at law” for equal school rights.³² As a young man, he had attended one of Boston’s segregated public schools, which made him feel “unworthy to be instructed in common with others.”³³ Similarly, African American educator Charles L. Reason decried racially exclusive schools for “teaching one child to feel that [another child] was ... inferior in position and destiny.”³⁴ Benjamin sought to shield his children from any feelings of inferiority, so he waited until, in his words, he occupied a “more fitting position” to embark upon a “practical experiment” to enroll Sarah at an all-white public school closest to their family home.³⁵ He called it “an experiment”—a loaded term that signified hypothesizing, planning, and testing. Well aware of mid-nineteenth-century cultural values, particularly those associated with girlhood and innocence, that could be manifested to make racially exclusive schools a thing of the past, Benjamin pushed Sarah forward as the icon around which educational justice should be realized.³⁶ Yet, by filing a lawsuit on her behalf, he pushed her into a legal environment, hoping that jurists would recognize and protect her girlhood by affirming her right to an equal education. The court did not.

Even though the *Roberts* case did not result in the desegregation of Boston public schools, five years of African American protest, including multiple petition drives—first by Benjamin Roberts and then later by Nell—and subsequent legislation, achieved that result. With a statute declaring that “in determining the qualifications of scholars to be admitted to any public school ... no distinction shall be made on account of the race, color or religious opinions,” Massachusetts became the first state to outlaw racial exclusion in public education.³⁷ Benjamin described the moment triumphantly:

The doors were thrown wide open, and it was to us the greatest *boon* ever bestowed upon our people. Our children do not feel now as their predecessors felt a thousand times while passing a school-house—as *inferiors*

³²“Death of B[enjamin]. F. Roberts,” *Boston Globe*, Jan. 25, 1895, 10.

³³Benjamin Roberts, *Report of the Colored People of the City of Boston, on the Subject of Exclusive Schools* (Boston, n.p., 1850), 2, Boston Public Library, RB XH.860.R54R.

³⁴“Equal School Rights,” (*Boston Liberator*, Feb. 8, 1850, 3.

³⁵B[enjamin]. F. Roberts, “Our Progress in the Old Bay State,” (*Washington, DC*) *New National Era*, March 31, 1870, 1.

³⁶Kabria Baumgartner, *In Pursuit of Knowledge: Black Women and Educational Activism in Antebellum America* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 152.

³⁷*Annual Report of the School Committee of the City of Boston 1857* (Boston: Geo C. Rand & Avery, 1858), 337.

and *outcasts*. To them new ideas are opened; a number are learning trades; there is a growing anxiety to get into the professions, and it will not be many years ere the full results of this glorious change will find many of our successors in the full enjoyment of positions of honor and emolument [emphasis in original].³⁸

For Benjamin, whole new vistas of possibility had opened. Given his hopeful remarks here, I too wondered whether Sarah had carried the mantle of African American education, most likely as a teacher. I soon learned that she did not.

Five years after Benjamin's death, Sarah's mother, Adeline, died at the age of seventy from uterine cancer. Adeline left a will. To her sons William and Samuel she left her Boston home on Barton Street. The remainder of her estate was split among her seven living children, including Sarah C. Dane. This document confirmed that Sarah was indeed alive in February 1887, but her surname was incorrectly spelled in the will. Moreover, newspapers around the country, from Ohio to Tennessee, republished Adeline Roberts's death notice, which credited her husband, Benjamin, as the purveyor of the *Roberts* case.³⁹ In contrast, neither Adeline nor Sarah were accorded any role in the matter, even though African American mothers and children played a key role in antebellum educational reform.⁴⁰

In December 1887, Sarah resurfaced in a vital record, identified as Sarah Casno and married to twenty-seven-year-old Mahlon Laws, an African American laborer. This marriage record misspelled her surname as Casno and again provided the incorrect age—thirty-years-old, but the birthplace and race were accurate. Between 1887 and 1896, there is another gap in the record about Sarah. Did she leave New Haven County? What did she do for a living in the late 1880s?

After searching through reels of microfilm, I stumbled upon an undeniable source: the death record of Sarah C. Laws. Upon reading it, I knew I had a document that tied all of these earlier sources together and confirmed her identity. On April 27, 1896, Sarah died of cancer, the same disease that took her mother's life almost a decade earlier. Sarah's death record matched—her birthplace was Boston; her parents were listed as Benjamin and Adeline Roberts; and her place of

³⁸Roberts, "Our Progress in the Old Bay State."

³⁹"Death of Mrs. Adeline Roberts," (Maysville, Kentucky) *Evening Bulletin*, Feb. 16, 1887, 1.

⁴⁰See, for instance, "Speech of Charles Lenox Remond," (*Boston*) *Liberator*, Dec. 28, 1855, 2; and "Triumph of Equal School Rights, in Boston," *Proceedings of the Presentation Meeting Held in Boston*, Dec. 17, 1855 (Boston: R. F. Wallcut, 1856). I also argue this point at length in my book, *In Pursuit of Knowledge*.

death was Orange, West Haven, Connecticut, not far from the city of New Haven.⁴¹ Sarah C. Roberts Casneau Dyer Laws: 1842–1896.

Interpreting the Sources

I drew from recent scholarship on the history of black girlhood to contextualize parts of Sarah's story and to reinterpret well-mined sources such as the legal arguments of Charles Sumner, a white lawyer who joined the Roberts legal team and later became a US senator from Massachusetts, the mountains of newspaper articles in the *Liberator* about Boston's equal school rights campaign, and African American petitions sent to the Massachusetts state legislature. Reform movements, among other factors, contributed to shifting perceptions of black girlhood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴² Historian Marcia Chatelain, for example, redefined black urbanization by exploring the Great Migration through the experiences and voices of black girls. As I studied the nineteenth-century Northeast, I discovered that Sarah C. Roberts was not the only black girl at the center of the equal school rights campaign. Other significant events also involved black girls, like Sarah Parker Remond in Salem, Massachusetts, and Eunice Ross in Nantucket, Massachusetts. This finding generates a new perspective, namely that black girls became symbols of educational justice. In the twentieth century, black girls such as Ruby Bridges were the face of school desegregation efforts, later immortalized in Norman Rockwell's 1964 painting *The Problem We All Live With*. But my work and the Roberts case demonstrate that this association has its origins in the nineteenth-century Northeast.

I also sat with the gaps and silences embedded within some of these sources, especially the strange business around Sarah's age. I surmise that the age discrepancy in Sarah's vital records could not be

⁴¹Death record of Sarah C. Laws, April 27, 1896, Record of Deaths in the Town of Orange 1, 550, Registrar of Vital Statistics, Orange, New Haven County, Connecticut.

⁴²Recent studies on the history of black girlhood include LaKisha Michelle Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Marcia Chatelain, *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Aimee Meredith Cox, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); and Nazera Sadiq Wright, *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016). There is a growing body of literature on African American girls and education in the contemporary moment. See, for instance, Signithia Fordham, *Downed by Friendly Fire: Black Girls, White Girls, and Suburban Schooling* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); and Monique W. Morris, *Pusbout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* (New York: New Press, 2016).

explained away as a mere clerical error. Rather, Sarah had altered her age, perhaps right around the time that she divorced John Casneau.⁴³ This misrepresentation surprised me and I have no explanation for it, but I am struck by the possibility that it could have been a form of self-protection—again, from what or whom, I am unsure. But this misrepresentation has implications as it relates to the *Roberts* case. When Sarah C. Roberts Casneau Dyer married her last husband, she indicated that her birth year was 1857, seven years after the *Roberts* ruling. The fact of the matter is that she likely would not have spoken publicly about the impact of the *Roberts* case since it would have exposed this lie about her age. Any reflections from her about the case or her activist family would have been done privately, anonymously, or, very possibly, not at all.

Since I do believe that Sarah misrepresented her age, then the 1880 US federal census record of Sarah Cassanny is indeed her. That means in late nineteenth-century New Haven Sarah labored as a washerwoman, like many other African American women, educated or not. If not washerwomen, then some worked as domestic servants. As scholar Nazera Wright argues, African American leaders knew that “no matter . . . how educated a black girl might become, she would face nearly insurmountable obstacles when she left her family home to make her way in the world.”⁴⁴ The popular belief in education as an elixir for freedom and prosperity completely ignores sociopolitical forces that constrained African American life. In other words, schooling did not suddenly broaden the occupational opportunities for even most African Americans nor did it protect them from economic uncertainty.⁴⁵

The *Roberts* case had a long-term impact on the identity of the Roberts family. In December 1929, a *Boston Globe* reporter wrote an article about William F. Roberts, a seventy-seven-year-old retired bookbinder who fed hungry pigeons and sparrows corn and bread-crumbs every day before the crack of dawn. The reporter focused on William, not so much as an old man who fed birds, despite what the article’s title indicates, but because William was part of an African American family with deep roots in Massachusetts. William’s father was Benjamin; his paternal grandfather was Robert, a servant, abolitionist, and later author of *The House Servant’s Directory: A Monitor for*

⁴³The New Haven County Superior Court Divorce file for the Casneaus did not provide Sarah’s age. I weighed the possibility that perhaps New Haven County had, at first, incorrectly recorded Sarah’s age and then never changed it, but that fails to explain why the 1880 US Census listed a similar birth year for Sarah.

⁴⁴Wright, *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century*, 8.

⁴⁵Baumgartner, *In Pursuit of Knowledge*, 10.

Private Families (1827); and his sister was Sarah, the plaintiff in the *Roberts* case. What William remembered, or at least what the reporter chose to print, was that Benjamin was “the first colored man in Boston to protest the exclusion of colored children from the public schools.”⁴⁶ At no point in the article did William mention his sister Sarah, who had been dead for some thirty-three years. Rather he talked about his father as the leader of the campaign for equal school rights—with no mention of Adeline either. No matter his own education, whatever that may have been, William and his wife were poor.

Despite the fact that education did not promise financial stability, African Americans fought hard for it nonetheless. Childhood was a time of intellectual and character development, and African American parents wanted their children to learn at the best schools. In that sense, many, though definitely not all, African American women, men, and children championed equal school rights, pursuing a host of strategies and tactics in the 1830s and 1840s. To think of Sarah’s long walk as spur-of-the-moment activism is simplistic and overly romantic. Such an interpretation gives short shrift to the hours, days, and weeks of planning by activists, and it fails to account for the energy and activity needed to lead and participate in such a cause.

Conclusion

How did the documents I uncovered affect my interpretation of the *Roberts* case? While Sarah was at the center of this case, it was Benjamin’s cause, one his whole life had primed him to take up. He did not wake up suddenly having to navigate segregated spaces; rather, he had them mapped out as a boy himself. A believer in education as an “immense value” and “powerful agent,” Benjamin seemed to want his children to regard education as a godsend and school as a democratic space.⁴⁷

Moreover, Sarah is not a historical tabula rasa, as mentioned earlier; she was a five-year-old girl thrust into the legal spotlight to win equal school rights in Boston. As a woman, she made New Haven County her home, navigating life’s many challenges—personal, social, and legal. Her education did not result in upward social mobility later in life. Hence, searching for her was critical: to gain a deeper appreciation for the contours of African American protest; to locate civil rights as a nineteenth-century struggle with tactics and strategies that would inspire activists in the twentieth century; to wrestle with the

⁴⁶“Cambridge Man Host at Birds’ Dawn Breakfasts,” *Boston Globe*, Dec. 28, 1929, 12.

⁴⁷“Equal School Privileges,” (*Boston*) *Liberator*, April 4, 1851, 3.

importance of education as well as its limits, especially for marginalized people; and, most of all, to consider the consequences of placing vulnerable children at the center of causes that should not require their presence at all.

My approach to archival work invites historians of education studying people of color in the distant past to acknowledge the politics at work in the archive, which often fragment their stories. Instead of remaining stuck in that disappointment, stymied by silence, historians of education can explore what *is* there in the archive. Such a search centers the subject, and new theories emerge. Recent scholarship—in this case, on the history of black girlhood—can then frame a reinterpretation of sources, bringing more voices and stories to the fore.