

Missionary, Educator ... Former Slave

“Here begins the history of things known only to those who have bid the American shores a long adieu...”
(Betsey Stockton, November 20, 1822)

“I have always remarked, that in the most dangerous situations, I have felt the easiest; and it was because I did not know my danger. And can there be any thing more like a sleeping Christian, or an unawakened sinner? both in imminent danger, and both stupid. O that God may save me from the spiritual, as he has in mercy from the natural evil.” (Betsey Stockton, February 8, 1823)

The grave of
BETSEY STOCKTON
a native of Princeton N.J.
where she died
Oct. 24, 1865,
Aged 67 years
Of African blood and born in
slavery she became fitted by
education and divine grace,
for a life of great usefulness,
for many years was a
valued missionary at the
Sandwich Islands in the
family of Rev. CS Stewart,
and afterwards till her
death, a popular and able
Principal of Public schools
in Philadelphia & Princeton
honored and beloved by a
large circle of Christian
Friends.

“Betsey Stockton’s life followed a remarkable trajectory from slavery to freedom, from Princeton to the Pacific, and back again. It illustrates how a single woman of color achieved a position of influence and impact in the complex racial climate of the antebellum North, where post-Revolutionary policies of gradual abolition had complicated and compromised the meaning of freedom.”

“In the years preceding her own emancipation, Betsey Stockton spent much of her time educating herself, eventually making the most of her manumission by becoming not just literate but committed to learning. Once free, she spent the rest of her life educating children of color, first in the Sandwich Islands, then in the Philadelphia infant school, and finally - for over three decades ... in Princeton’s African American community.”

“Her success in each setting defines the single most meaningful constant in her life story, about which the historical record is clear: everyone who observed her work, black and white alike, came away with unqualified admiration. Even more important, her students came away with the critical essentials of education ... but also respect both for themselves and for Betsey Stockton.” (Nobles; Princeton)

African-American Slave

Betsey Stockton was born in about 1798; the exact year is not clear. Her mother was most likely an enslaved African-American woman in the Princeton household of Robert Stockton, one of New Jersey's most politically-prominent families of the Revolutionary era. Her father may have been white.

At least two white women in the Stockton family had the nickname "Betsey" before her, and it could well be that the baby Betsey received her given name not from her own birth mother, but from someone on the white side of the Stockton family, using the family name for the mixed-race newborn child. In any event, she went by "Betsey" throughout her entire life and, at least by 1816, also used the surname "Stockton." (Nobles; Princeton)

"The Rev. Dr. Ashbel Green, later President of the (Princeton) College, (1812-'21) married Mr. Stockton's eldest daughter, and Betsey became a part of his household at a time which cannot now be determined."

"She became a thoroughly trained domestic nurse, seamstress and cook, acquiring an invaluable practical education so that she could do skilfully whatever was assigned her. It is understood that Mr. Green did not favor educating his servants in books, but she was so desirous to learn that his sons, who appreciated her natural intelligence and her merit, helped her in her study." (Pacific Commercial Advertiser, May 12, 1906)

"(I)n 1813, Green sold three years of her service to Nathaniel Todd, a relative and fellow Presbyterian pastor in Woodbury, New Jersey. Green needed someone else to give Stockton guidance and discipline, or at least to create some distance between himself and the enslaved teenage girl." (Nobles; Princeton)

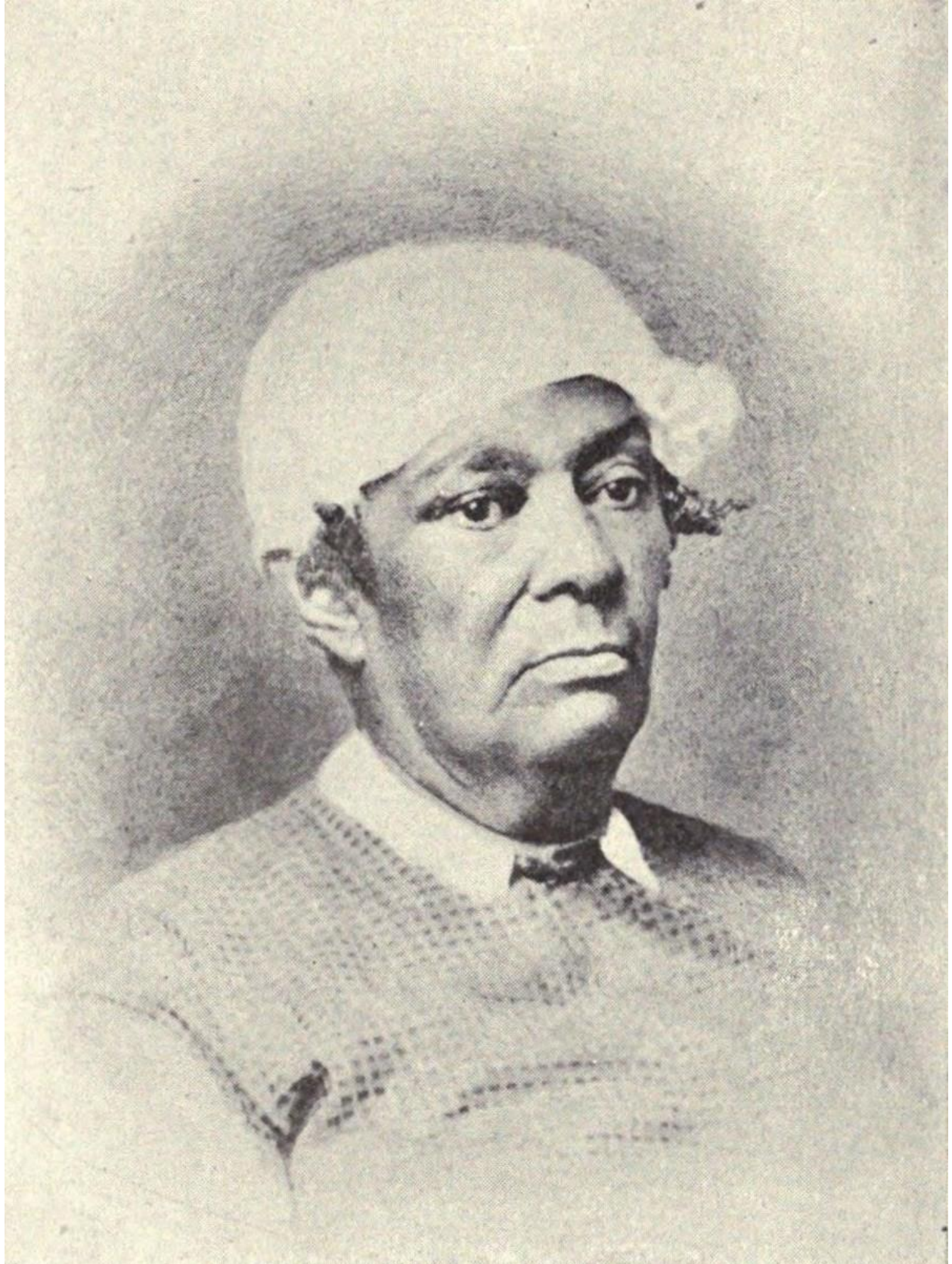
In 1816, Betsey Stockton came back to live with the Greens, apparently still Green's property. Green notes, "(A)s I hope and she believes," Stockton "met with a saving change of heart while she lived in my family . . . in the summer of 1816."

This apparent religious conversion led to Stockton's admission to full membership in Princeton's First Presbyterian Church in September 1816, when the church records identified her as "a coloured woman living in the family of the Revd. Dr. Green." Around 1817, Ashbel Green freed her, "and have since paid her wages as a hired woman." (Nobles; Princeton)

Stockton often spoke to Green about her wish to journey abroad, possibly to Africa, on a Christian mission. Green introduced her to Charles S Stewart, a young missionary, newly ordained in 1821, who was about to be sent by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) to Hawai'i. (Gates and Higginbotham)

"Mr. Charles S. Stewart, afterward a Doctor of Divinity and long the Senior Chaplain in, the United States Navy, was graduated from the College in 1815, was a graduate student in 1816, and was in the Seminary 1818."

"During all his Princeton residence (Stewart) was intimate in President Green's family and thus had an opportunity of learning Betsey's character. She had become a devoted Christian early in life and when Mr. Stewart, who had been accepted as a missionary, took his bride to Princeton to meet his old friends, Betsey saw her and expressed her desire to accompany them to their foreign field." (Pacific Commercial Advertiser, May 12, 1906)



Becoming an American Protestant Missionary

“Finally an arrangement was made with Dr. Green by Mr. Stewart which enabled her to go.’ It does not appear what this arrangement was, but possibly it involved a pecuniary element.” (Pacific Commercial Advertiser, May 12, 1906)

“Africa was where she wanted to go at first, but according to her Sabbath school teacher, her friends dissuaded her, and the opportunity of joining a group of missionaries to the Hawaiian islands then arose. ... The idea of having Betsey Stockton accompany Stewart came up, and Ashbel Green wrote letters of recommendation for the two of them. Stockton’s Sabbath school teacher, Michael Osborn, wrote another for her.”

“The letters, besides explaining Stockton’s personal history, also convey the range of her mind. Osborn describes her as ‘pious, intelligent, industrious, skilful in the management of domestic affairs[,] apt to teach, and endued with a large portion of the active, persevering, self-sacrificing, spirit of a missionary,’ and notes that she ‘has a larger acquaintance with sacred history and the mosaic Institutions, than almost any ordinary person, old or young, I have ever known (by ordinary person you will understand me to mean such as are not clergymen or candidates for the ministry).’”

“She has been studying with a view to taking charge of a school for black children, and Osborn comments that ‘[h]er knowledge of geography is respectable, she has conquered the larger part of murray’s english grammar, writes a legible hand, and is now cyphering in compound multiplication.’”

“Green’s letter pays more attention to her domestic skills - ‘her services have been so valuable that I shall regret to lose them,’ he says wistfully. But he too notes her ‘great aptitude for mental improvement’: ‘She reads extremely well; and few of her age and sex have read more books on religion than she; or can give a better account of them.’”

“She has no small share of miscellaneous reading, and has a real taste for literature. She understands Geography and English grammer, pretty well. She composes in English, in a manner that is very uncommon for one of her standing in society. She is tolerably skilled in arithmatick.” (African-American Religion, University of Chicago Press)

“Over the next year after the letters went in Charles Stewart had to raise money for his journey and residence in the Sandwich Islands, and Green later recalled that Stockton saved her wages to outfit herself for the expedition, Green making a contribution as well.”

“Though the Board paid a significant amount of the expenses of these missions, the missionaries themselves had to help. In June 1822, Stewart married, and in October he came to Princeton to make the final arrangements with Stockton. In the course of the visit, the contract regarding her employment was drawn.” (African-American Religion, University of Chicago Press)

Stockton’s relationship and agreement with the mission was unique.

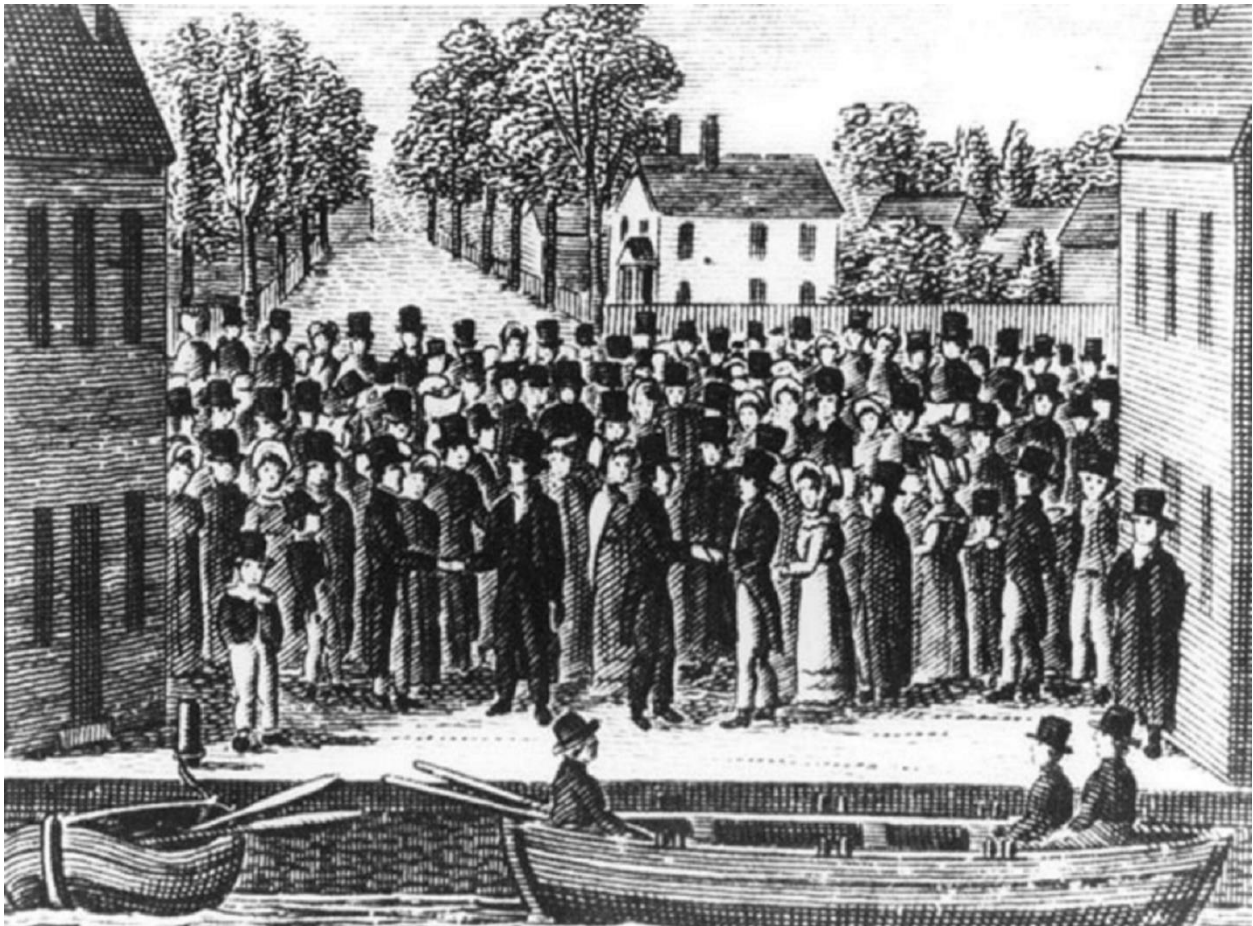
“Her ABCFM contract put her in something of a social middle ground, calling for her ‘to be regarded & treated neither as an equal nor as a servant, but as an humble Christian friend.’ Subsequent newspaper reports of her departure gave a bit more clarity to her prospective role, describing her as a ‘pious coloured woman, qualified to teach a school and take charge of domestic concerns.’ That’s exactly what she would do once the Thames reached its destination.” (Nobles; Princeton)

Getting to the Hawaiian Islands

Stockton and Stewart were part of the Second Company (First Reinforcements) of American Protestant missionaries to Hawai'i.

The Second Company destined for the Hawaiian Islands Mission assembled at New Haven for the purpose of taking passage in the ship Thames, captain Closby, which was to sail on the November 19, 1822. (Congregational Magazine)

The members of the first reinforcement were critical in the expansion of the Mission, important relationships with the royal family and, through the efforts of missionary William Richards, the development of a Hawaiian constitutional government.



“The ship followed a southeasterly course across the Atlantic, sailing between the Cape Verde Islands and the African coast, then southwest toward Argentina and around Cape Horn past Chile and northwest to Hawaii.”

“Going very rapidly, at the rate of nine and a half miles it hour. The weather very pleasant. We have not suffered so much with the heat since we came near the line, as we did some time ago. The air is more like that on land than we have felt it for three weeks past. Saw a large tortoise, but could not take it, without delaying the ship too long. We regretted the loss very much. Fresh meat would be very acceptable to us; we have had none since Christmas. Pork and beef are our standing dishes.”

“In the division of the missionary stores I always have my share, so that I have indeed a double portion of the good things of this life; for Mr. and Mrs. S(tewart) give me always a share with them. The last apple and orange were cut in three pieces, and divided between us. The impression that such little things make on my mind will not easily be erased. O that I were worthy of such favours, but I fear I am not.” (Stockton’s January 8, 1823 Journal Entry; African-American Religion, University of Chicago Press)

“On the 11th (April, 1823) Mrs. Stewart presented us with a fine boy (Charles Seaforth Stewart), which I consider as my charge. The little fellow beguiles many of my lonely hours; and you must excuse me if my journal is now weekly instead of daily.”

“From the first moment that I saw the little innocent, I felt emotions that I was unacquainted with before. This, no doubt, arose from the peculiar situation in which I was placed, and from my attachment to his parents.”

“It was one in the morning when I saw Mr. Stewart up in the cabin. Sleep forsook my eyes, and with a heavy heart I asked - what is the matter? The answer was just what I had been fearing - that Mrs. Stewart was unwell.”

“I had hoped and prayed that the winds might waft us to our destined port, before her day of affliction should arrive. ... I was soon, however, delivered from all my fears. Her hours of suffering were not many. At half past nine, we had our little stranger in our arms, and his mother in a comfortable situation.” (Stockton’s Journal Entry; African-American Religion, University of Chicago Press)

“On the 24th (April 1823,) we saw and made Owhyhee. At the first sight of the snow-capped mountains, I felt a strange sensation of joy and grief. It soon wore away, and as we sailed slowly past its windward side, we had a full view of all its grandeur.”

Landing at Honolulu, O’ahu – Assigned to Lahaina, Maui

“Two or three canoes, loaded with natives, came to the ship ... we asked them where the king was at Hawaii, or Oahu? They said at Oahu. We informed them that we were missionaries, come to live with them, and do them good. At which an old man exclaimed, in his native dialect, what may be thus translated - ‘That is very good, by and by, know God.’” (Stockton)

They landed on O’ahu. “The Mission is in prosperous circumstances, and the hopes of its supporters here were never brighter. Truly the fields are already ripe for the harvest, and we may add, ‘The harvest is great, but the labourers are few.’”

“We have been received with open arms by the government and people, and twice the number of missionaries would have been joyfully hailed.” (Charles Samuel Stewart)

“On Saturday, the 10th of May (1823), we left the ship, and went to the mission enclosure at Honoruru. We had assigned to us a little thatched house in one corner of the yard, consisting of one small room, with a door, and two windows—the door too small to admit a person walking in without stooping, and the windows only large enough for one person to look out at a time.”

“Near us was another of the same kind, occupied by Mr. R(ichards), and opposite one much larger, where Mr. B(ishop) and E(ly) resided. Next to them stood another small one, in which Mr. Ellis, of the London

Mission Society resided; and in the mission house (which at home would be called small) there were Messrs. Bingham, Thurston, Loomis, Harwood, Goodrich, Blatchley and Chamberlain.”

“The family all eat at the same table, and the ladies attend to the work by turns. Mrs. Stewart and myself took each of us a day separately.”

“On the 26th of May we heard that the barge was about to sail for Lahaina, with the old queen and princes; and that the queen (Keōpūolani) was desirous to have missionaries to accompany her; and that if missionaries would consent to go, the barge should wait two days for them.”

“(T)he king this morning hastened off in a small yacht, and left orders for the barge (the celebrated Cleopatra) and Waverley, to follow to Lahaina: they are now preparing to get under weigh, and I must secure a passage. Two weeks after we arrived at the islands, we were sent to this place, which is considered the best part of the whole. The productions are melons, bananas, sweet potatoes, &c.” (Stockton)

“The prosperity of the mission is uninterrupted, and its prospects most encouraging. ... We are very comfortably located at one of the most beautiful and important spots on the islands. Mr. Richards and myself have an island with 20,000 inhabitants committed to our spiritual care - a solemn - a most responsible charge!” (Stewart)

“It was there, as (Betsey said,) that she opened a school for the common people which was certainly the first of the kind in Maui and probably the first in all Hawaii; for at the beginning the missionaries were chiefly engaged in the instructions of the chiefs and their families.” (Maui News, May 5, 1906)

Teacher of the Maka‘āinana on Maui

“The 29th (June 1923) was the Sabbath. I went in the morning with the family to worship; the scene that presented itself was one that would have done an American’s heart good to have witnessed. Our place of worship was nothing but an open place on the beach, with a large tree to shelter us; on the ground a large mat was laid, on which the chief persons sat. To the right there was a sofa, and a number of chairs; on these the missionaries, the king, and principal persons sat.”

“The kanakas, or lower class of people, sat on the ground in rows; leaving a passage open to the sea, from which the breeze was blowing. Mr. R(ichards) addressed them from these words, ‘It is appointed unto all men once to die, and after death the judgment.’ Honoru acted as interpreter: the audience all appeared very solemn.” (Stockton)

“After service the favourite queen (Ka‘ahumanu) called me, and requested that I should take a seat with her on the sofa, which I did, although I could say but few words which she could understand. Soon after, bidding them aroha I returned with the family. In the afternoon we had an English sermon at our house: about fifty were present, and behaved well.”

“In the morning one of the king’s boys came to the house, desiring to be instructed in English. Mr. S(tewart) thought it would be well for me to engage in the work at once. Accordingly I collected a proper number and commenced. I had four English, and six Hawaiian scholars. This, with the care of the family, I find as much as I can manage.” (Stockton)

Stockton has asked the mission to allow her “to create a school for the maka‘āinana (common people.) Stockton learned the Hawaiian Language and established a school in Maui where she taught English, Latin, History and Algebra”. (Kealoha)

“It shows that a sincere desire to accomplish a good purpose need not be thwarted by other necessary engagements, however humble or exacting.” (Maui News, May 5, 1906)

“Betsey was greatly skilled in all matters relating to caring for a household, including care of the sick ... This valuable friend and companion threw herself into the concerns of the Stewart family and the small mission station at Lahaina. But perhaps her most notable contribution as a missionary assistant in the Sandwich Islands was as a teacher. It is significant that she helped to organize and was put in charge of the first school on the islands open to commoners - predominantly farmers.”

“She wrote to Ashbel Green in 1824: ‘I have now a fine school of the ... lower class of people, the first, I believe, that has ever been established.’ Charles Stewart wrote that these Common folk had made application for books and slates and a teacher.”

“So, beginning with about thirty individuals, this school was formed in the chapel, meeting every afternoon under the supetintendence of Betsey, who, he said, ‘is quite familiar with the native tongue.’ Other missionaries had established the first schools in the islands, usually attended by the upper classes. Betsey, the former slave, was the first to organize a school for the disadvantaged.” (Moffett)

Leaving the Islands

“After only two and a half years in Hawaii, Mrs. Stewart became so ill that their whole family, including a new little daughter born to the Stewarts during that time, found it necessary to return to America ... Betsey chose to leave with them. They were offered a gratuitous passage to England by Captain Dale of the English whaleship Fawn.”

“After a six-month voyage, from October 15, 1825, until April, 1826, they arrived at the English port of Gravesend. Following a layover of several months in London, they continued the return journey to America, arriving at New York in August.”

“Although her ministry in the Sandwich Islands was relatively brief, her missionary impulses never diminished to the end of her life.”

“Following her return from the Sandwich Islands, Betsey kept an infant school for black children for a while in Philadelphia. But because of Harriet Stewart's continuing frail health, she stood ready and went on a number of occasions to help care for Harriet and the children. Charles Stewart had been forced to resign his missionary commission because of his wife's health and had joined the navy chaplaincy.”

“Betsey was with Harriet and the children in Cooperstown, New York, during the winter of 1826 and probably through most of 1827. For four months during the summer of 1827 their ‘Aunt Betsey’ and the children were in Albany, New York, while Mrs. Stewart was away travelling with her husband.”

“Sometime in the summer or autumn of 1829 a Methodist missionary, Mr. William Case, traveled to Philadelphia, where Betsey was living again, with the purpose of trying to persuade the young woman to

answer another missionary call and go with him to organize schools and instruct native Indian children at Grape Island across the border in Canada, near upstate New York.”

“She went for a few months and on her return brought a birchbark canoe about three or four feet long to little Charles Stewart, then about six years old. The family was in New Haven, Connecticut, that year, staying with Harriet’s ‘adopted’ father while Charles Stewart was away with his ship.”

“When Harriet Stewart died in 1830, just four years after they had returned from Hawaii, ‘Aunt Betsey’ answered a call again and went to Cooperstown, New York, to care for the (by now) three motherless children. Their father soon had to leave again, as he so often did for long stretches of time when his ship was away at sea.”

“In 1833 Betsey decided to move the children and herself back to Princeton, even though Dr. Green and his household had been living again in Philadelphia for the past eleven years. James Green, her childhood family tutor, had married and established a notable law practice in Princeton. So Betsey undoubtedly had his family to help her locate to the town she thought of as home, though under very changed circumstances. She enrolled young Charles, then about eleven years old, in the Edgehill School on Hibben Road.”

“Charles Stewart, the children’s father, remarried in 1835 and they went back with him to New York. But Betsey stayed on in Princeton. She was truly alone for the first time in her life and had some depressing bouts of illness.”

“After a while she moved beyond the time of gloomy loneliness and anxiety over her future and succeeded in opening a public, or ‘common,’ school for black children, which she served with great distinction for many years as principal.”



“During the time of her early years back in Princeton, there was some racial tension at the First Presbyterian Church, Betsey’s home church. In the mid-1830s an opportunity arose for the black members of the church to separate and form their own congregation a few blocks away. Betsey Stockton’s name heads the list of the founding members of the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church of Princeton.”

“She helped to found a Sabbath school for children and young people in connection with the church and was its most faithful teacher for twenty-five or thirty years. (Moffett)

She never married but stayed in touch with Stewart and his son, Charles Seaforth Stewart, the baby born at sea. In 1860 the son bought her a house in Princeton, “a one-story white cottage on a lot near the northeast corner of Green and Witherspoon, now built upon. The grounds and building were always neat and attractive and the interior of the house was a model of cleanliness and order.” (Dodd)

For people whose right to equal education, or education of any sort, had been so long questioned, denigrated, and disdained, this tribute to their teacher also served as a tribute to their own achievement. By giving Betsey Stockton a prominent place in the black community's main church—her window in the Witherspoon Street Church is still visible today on walking tours of the town

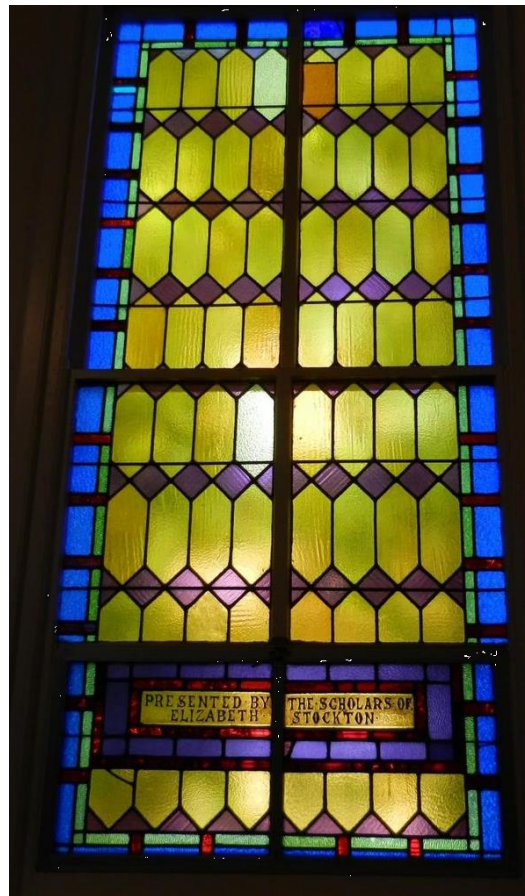
Betsey Stockton made pioneering endeavors as a missionary in Hawaii, but her legacy is not well known. Still, Stockton's school "set a new direction for education in the Islands ... (It) served as a model for the Hilo Boarding School."

Her teaching program have influence Samuel C Armstrong, the founder of Hampton Institute, whose father worked as a missionary in Hawaii during this period. After a full and productive life of service for the Lord, Betsey Stockton passed away in October of 1865 in Princeton, New Jersey. (Johnson)

"Betsey Stockton died on October 24, 1865, just a few months after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and the end of the Civil War. In Princeton, her funeral brought together a considerable crowd of both races, 'a highly respectable congregation of her own color . . . [and] representatives from many of the most distinguished families of Princeton, with clergymen and other friends . . . from the neighboring cities of New York and Philadelphia.' President John Maclean Jr. of the College of New Jersey conducted the service, and several other local notables offered tributes." (Nobles; Princeton)

"Over thirty years after Betsey Stockton's death, Charles Seaforth Stewart - the baby born on board the Thames in 1823 - described a proposal in Princeton to make a tablet to her memory and send it to the site of her missionary work."

"Her 'loyal service' lasted quite a long time, and to a great extent she was the one and only. The most fitting symbol of her exceptional status is the simple but elegant stained-glass window still in the Witherspoon Street Church, which commemorates Stockton's memory and the lasting legacy of her chosen role in Princeton's African American community: 'Presented by the Scholars of Elizabeth Stockton.'" The use of the formal version of her name, Elizabeth, suggests a reflection of the more formal term her students used to describe themselves, 'Scholars.'"



"For people whose right to equal education, or education of any sort, had been so long questioned, denigrated, and disdained, this tribute to their teacher also served as a tribute to their own achievement. By giving Betsey Stockton a prominent place in the black community's main church - her window in the Witherspoon Street Church is still visible today on walking tours of the town—they underscored her place in the community's collective memory. Now, a century and a half after Betsey Stockton's death, the memory that forms a part of the 'people's history' in Princeton points the way to securing her larger place in American history." (Nobles; Princeton)