

The Life and Travels of Nancy Gardner Prince (1799–1859)

A Black Woman’s Extraordinary Journey through 19th-Century America, Russia, and Jamaica

NANCY PRINCE WROTE ONE OF THE FEW SURVIVING AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF A FREE BLACK WOMAN in the pre-Civil War United States. Her father, Thomas Gardner, a sailor, died shortly after Nancy was born here in Newburyport, and her mother Mary remarried. Her maternal grandfather, Tobias Wornton, shared with Nancy stories of being stolen from Africa and his life as a soldier during the Revolutionary War and at the Battle of Bunker Hill. After the deaths of her grandfather and stepfather in 1813, Nancy’s family became impoverished and the children were scattered. Nancy gathered wild berries for sale in Cape Ann and worked as a servant. During the winter of 1816, she traveled on foot and by horse and sleigh to Boston where she rescued her older sister Silvia from a brothel.

“After seven years of anxiety and toil,” Nancy wrote, “I made up my mind to leave my country.” At age 24, she married an older sailor named Nero Prince, who had been recruited as a Black footman to the Russian Emperor in Saint Petersburg. Nancy and Nero sailed to Russia in 1824, where they lived and worked in two Emperors’ courts for the next decade. Nancy learned French and Russian, sewed children’s clothing, and ran a boarding house. When Nancy’s lungs became weakened by the Russian winters, she returned to Massachusetts on her own. Nero died in Russia before he could join her.

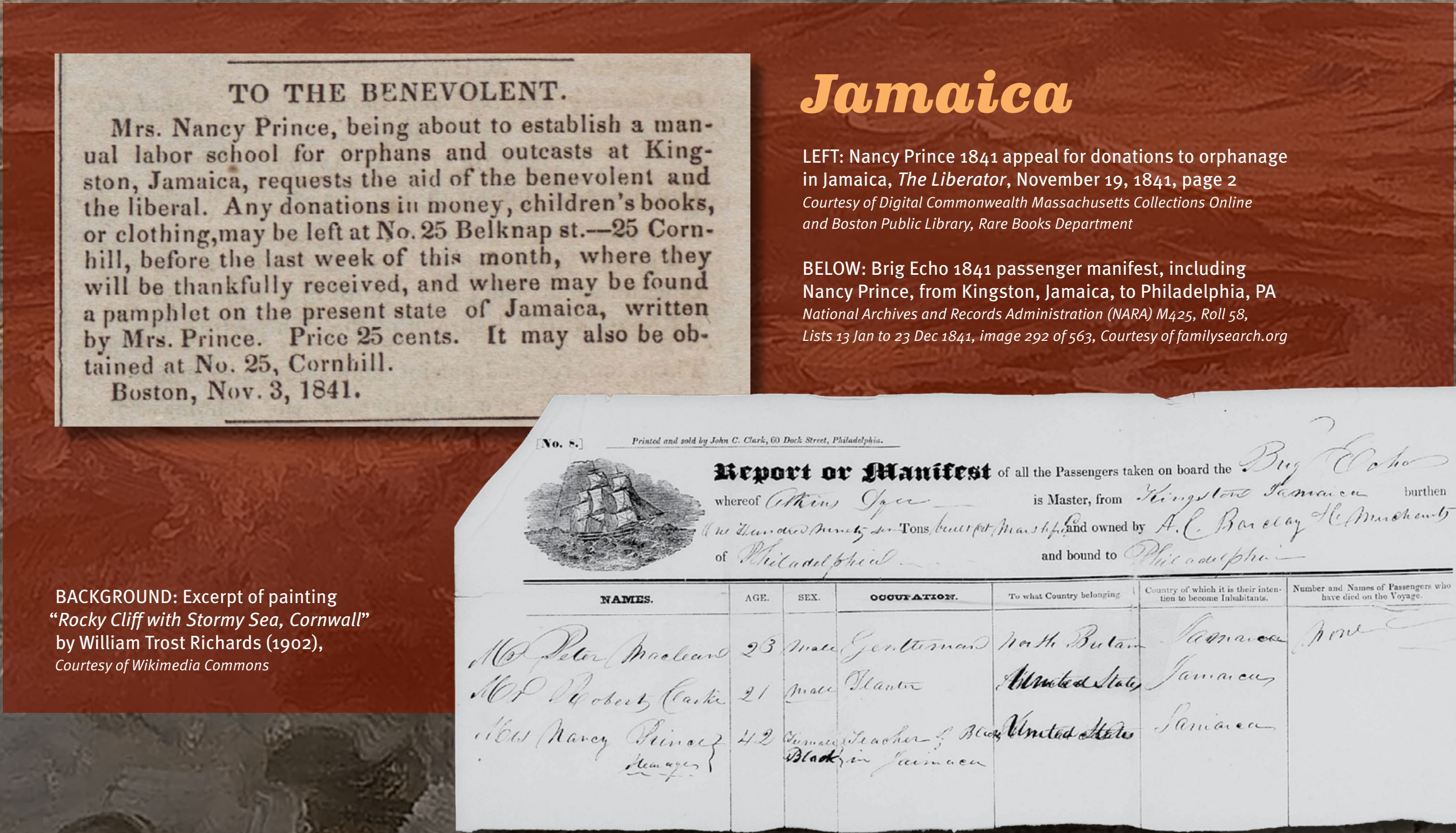
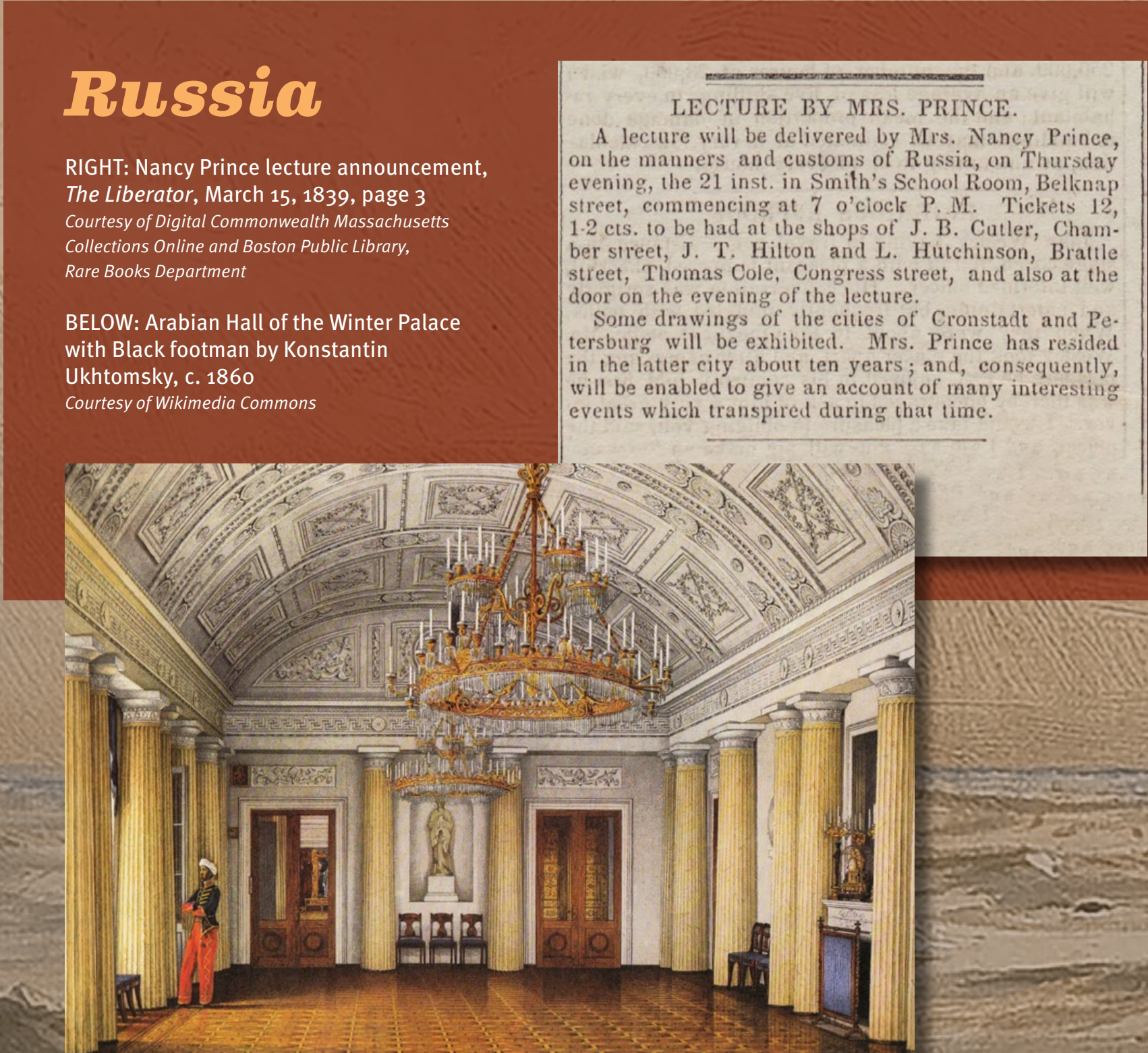
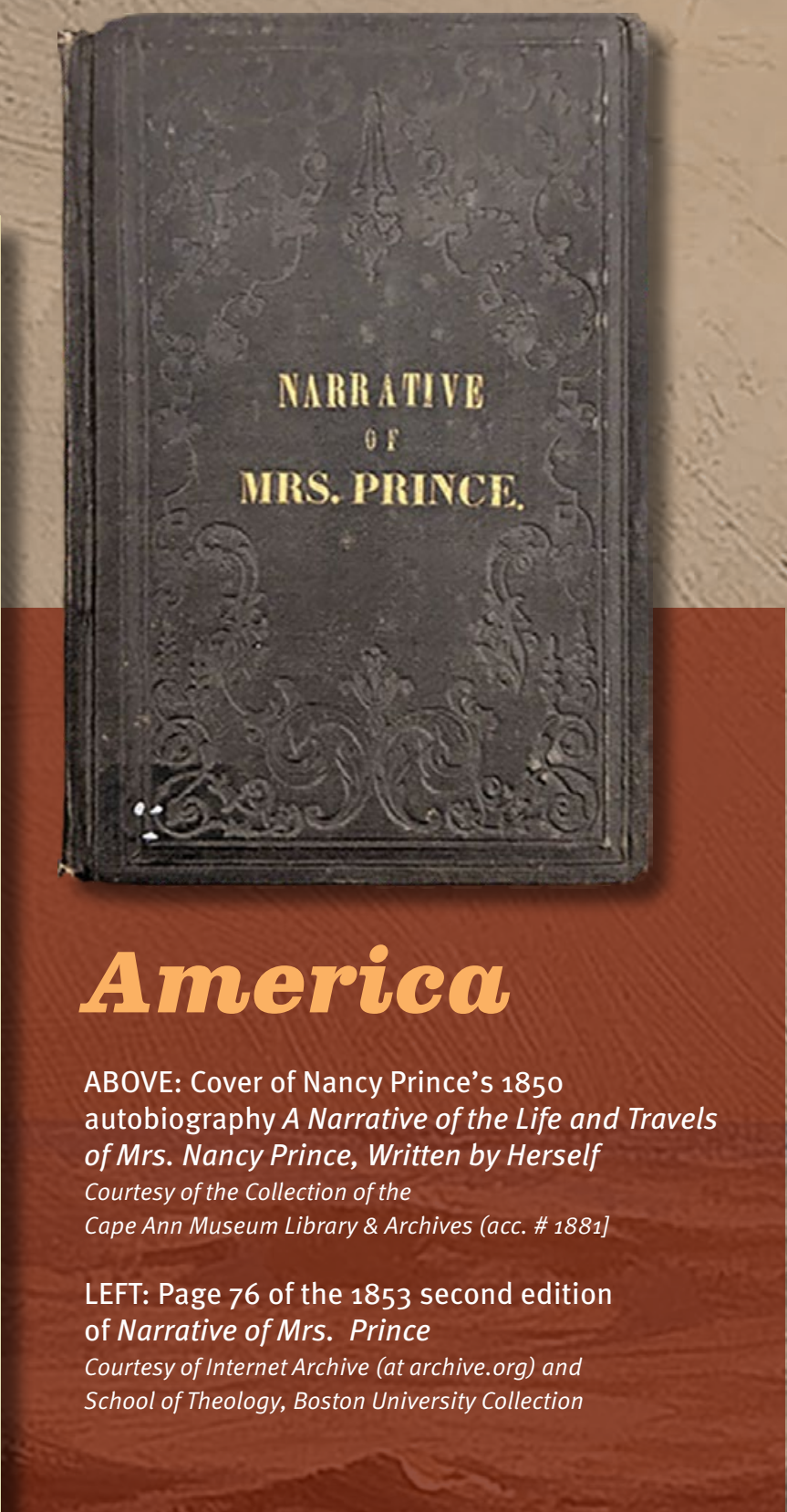
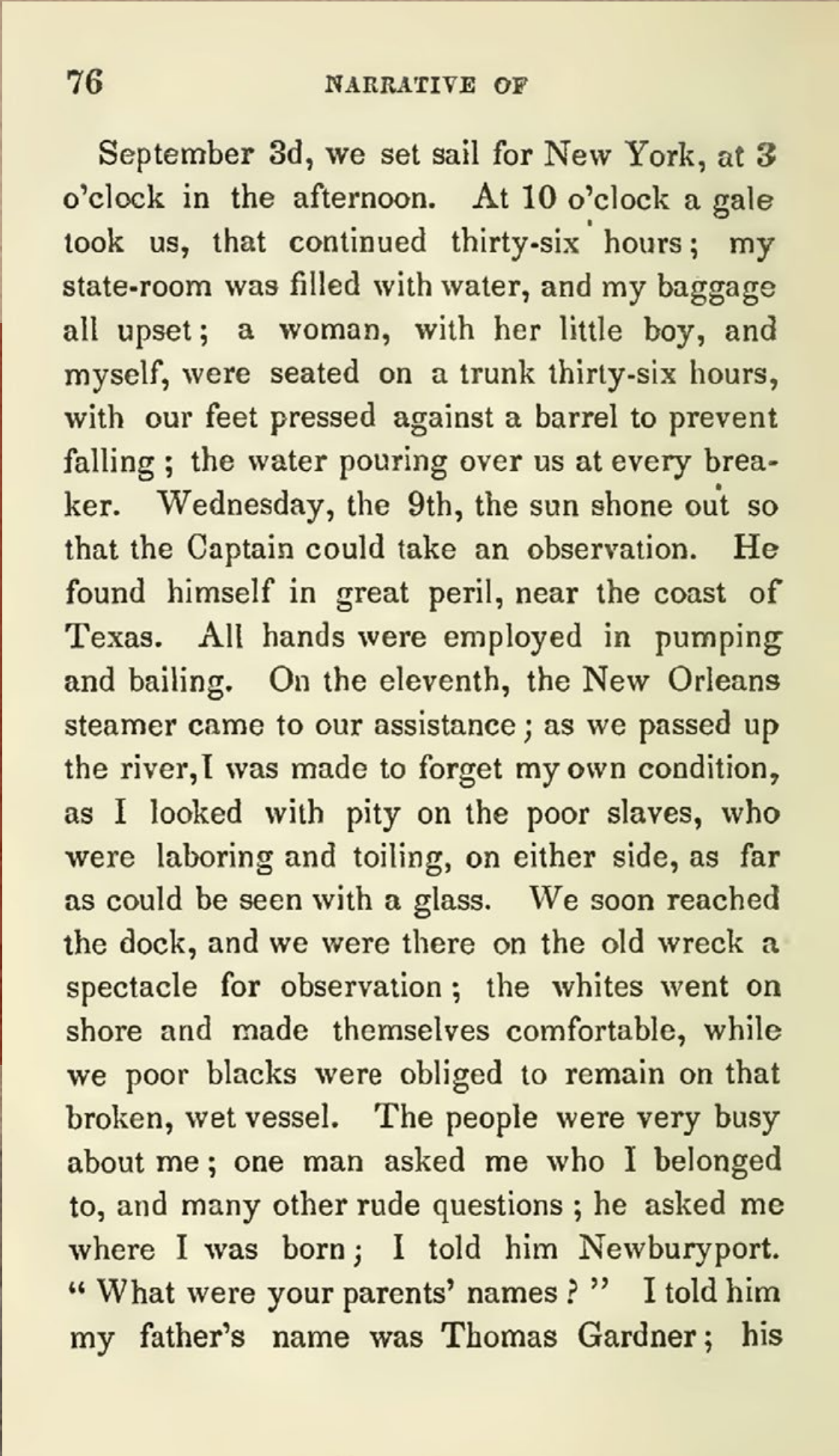
Back in the U.S., Nancy Prince lamented, “the weight of prejudice has again oppressed me.” In Boston, she worked as a seamstress, delivered public lectures about her travels in Russia, and became a member of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society. In the early 1840s, Nancy sailed to Jamaica for missionary work. On a stormy return trip in 1842, Prince narrowly kept her freedom after the ship *Comet* diverted to Key West and New Orleans. Nancy’s memoir chronicles how she witnessed other Black passengers captured for sale into slavery.

The Woman’s Era newspaper recounts Nancy’s role in a dramatic 1847 Underground Railroad rescue in Boston. Leading a group of Black women and children, Nancy saved her neighbor Mrs. Dorsey by physically confronting a notorious slave hunter named “Woodfork” (Woolfolk), hauling him out of the house, pelting him with stones, and chasing him away.

In 1850, Nancy published the first edition of her influential memoir, and in 1854 was invited to speak at the National Women’s Rights Convention in Philadelphia. Nancy Gardner Prince died of an illness in 1859, at the age of 60, and is buried in Everett, MA.

There are unfortunately no known images to date of Nancy Prince, but her memory lives on.

By Geordie Vining, Ali Tal-mason, Kabria Baumgartner, and Cyd Raschke (2023)



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