

Latecomers to Freedom

NEW JERSEY IS a Northern state. It would be easy to assume that slavery didn't exist here or didn't amount to much. Unfortunately, that was not the case. Slavery existed in New Jersey from its very earliest days as a colony through the end of Civil War. Not only did New Jersey have the second highest number of slaves in the North, after New York, it was slow to free them. And our part of the state was especially slow. In fact, the number of slaves in Essex County rose by nearly a third in the final decade of the 18th century, the largest percentage increase in the state, at a time when New England and Pennsylvania had already enacted abolition. Local newspapers were filled with classified ads for "Negro boys" and "wenches," as well as notices of runaway slaves.

When New Jersey was part of the Dutch colony of New Netherlands, Dutch privateers seized slaves from Spanish ships and brought them into the city of New Amsterdam. Some were given their freedom; some were kept as slaves and forced to work. By 1664, when the English took over, the colony had about 300 slaves scattered over a region that extended from Connecticut to Delaware.

Slavery became institutionalized under the English. The new rulers of New Jersey wanted to attract settlers, so they granted land to qualified "freemen." Able-bodied white men were entitled to 150 acres, plus 150 acres for each "able" servant—white men or women who voluntarily worked for the landholder—and 75 acres for each "weak" servant, either an indentured white person or an African slave over the age of 14. Whereas an indentured servant received the 75-acre allotment after his or her term of service, a slave had no hope of ever owning land.

The first piece of legislation that directly mentioned slavery in New Jersey passed in 1675 and forbade the trans-

portation or harboring of slaves who had left their master or mistress without permission. From that year on, the documents relating to slavery in N.J.



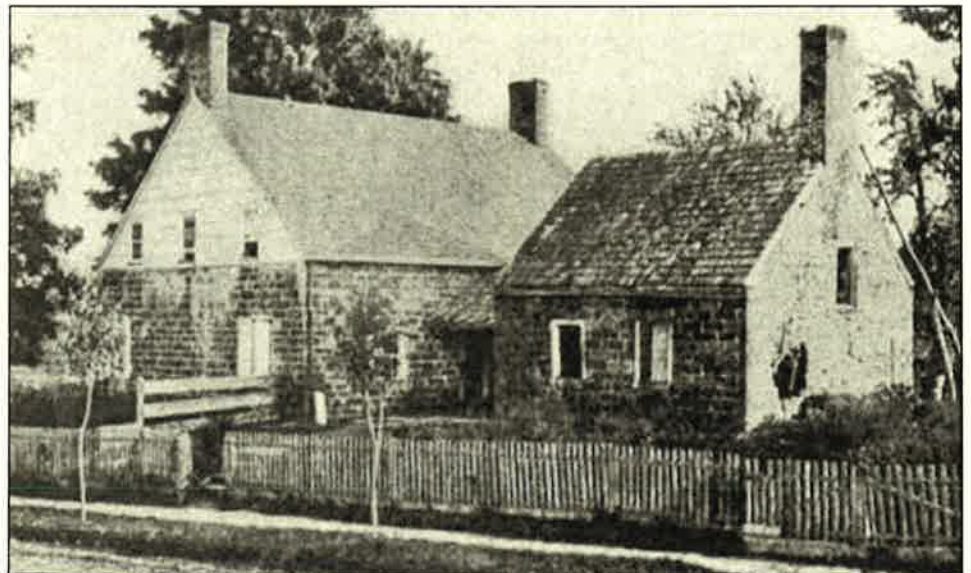
Harriet and Lafayette Hoag. The latter was an ex-slave from Virginia who settled in Rutherford after the Civil War. Courtesy of Meadowlands Museum

became more numerous, indicating that slavery was increasingly common. In 1695 so-called slave courts were established to mete out (severe) punishment to slaves who were convicted of murder and other felonies. The courts also levied fines on owners whose slaves were convicted of theft.

In 1702 Queen Anne and her suc-

cessor, George I, began to promote slavery in the New World more actively. They made it difficult to free slaves by demanding that the owners post a £200 bond, meant to reimburse the colony should it have to care for the freed person. Bergen County also saw an influx of planters from Barbados, who brought in slaves and set up plantations in what is now the Meadowlands. In 1726 approximately 2,600 slaves lived in New Jersey (8 percent of the population); by 1745, there were about 4,700 (7.5 percent). The founding families of Newark and its environs held slaves. Thomas Davis, who owned much of the land that became Bloomfield and Glen Ridge, bequeathed five slaves to his sons when he died in 1739.

Some rebelled. The *New York Gazette* reported a revolt in Somerville in 1734. The correspondent wrote that slaves in the area were under the impression that local slaveowners were ignoring an order from King George II to free them. When the plan for an uprising became known, 30 blacks were arrested. One was hanged, several others had their ears cut off, and the rest were whipped. We have no independent documentation of the alleged conspiracy, but white New Jerseyans were clearly on edge, and the colony tightened its restrictions on slaves: restricting the number on any given farm,



Kitchen and slave quarters behind the original Thomas Cadmus house on Washington Street in Bloomfield. From Bloomfield, Old and New by Joseph Folsom

banning them from carrying hunting rifles when not in the presence of their masters, and forbidding them from assembling, being on the streets at night, or traveling more than five miles from home without written permission. Those who fought back were sometimes burned at the stake. In 1741 Daniel Harrison of Orange sent the Essex County Freeholders a bill for the wood he had used to burn two transgressors.

Among white colonists, the main opposition to slavery came from Quakers, especially through the efforts of preacher John Woolman of Mount Holly in the 1750s and '60s. Quakers freed the slaves they owned and became the major force behind ending the institution, especially in the western part of the colony. Other New Jerseyans started to join them, but it was a long and painful process.

By the start of the Revolution there were about 4,500 slaves in New Jersey, a little less than 7.5 percent of the population. The British offered freedom to any black who joined their cause, and thousands took them up on the offer. Runaway slaves swelled the population of British-held New York and, at the end of the war, were evacuated to Nova Scotia or London. The British recorded their names in a document they called the *Book of Negroes*. Thomas Davis's grandson Caleb had a slave, Ceasar Jones, who escaped from his homestead in Bloomfield and departed with the British.

Other African Americans served

courageously in the Continental Army. One was Cudjo, the slave of Benjamin Coe in Newark; after the war, Coe set Cudjo free and gave him an acre of downtown real estate. Many fought for America's freedom from Britain only to be forced back into bondage.

Revolutionary ideals inspired some whites—notably future governor Joseph Bloomfield, after whom the town is named—to oppose slavery. But in the near term, the war entrenched the institution, because wartime devastation led whites to fear further economic instability from abolition. New Jersey was the last Northern state to act against slavery—and even then, progress was fitful. In 1786 the Assembly banned the importation of slaves from Africa and eased some of the impediments to freeing slaves, although a slave could still not be freed if he or she was under the age of 21. The Gradual Abolition Act, passed in 1804, stipulated that every child born to a slave after July 4 of that year had to be given freedom at age 25 for men and 21 for women.

But no one who wanted to own slaves in New Jersey was ever forced to give them up. The law was riddled with loopholes. One clause let slave-owners formally abandon children and "place" them in the owner's household at state expense. In other words, slave-owners could become foster parents of slave children, not only retaining effective ownership, but getting subsidized to do so. The effect was state-sponsored slavery. In 1809 disbursements for

abandoned slave children devoured 40 percent of the state budget, and the legislature scrapped the system in 1811. That was a mixed blessing for slaves, however, since it eliminated the only legal incentive for slaveholders to register their chattel. Many began to keep slaves off the books.

Nor did the law end the slave trade. In 1810, Joseph Munn, who owned a tavern in what is now downtown Montclair, sold his slave Jem to a resident of Bergen County for \$275.

The law thus created degrees of unfreedom—a confusing hierarchy of slaves, bound laborers, and free people. In Bloomfield, there was the example of Massy, a slave of Caleb Davis's son, Joseph. In 1796, Joseph's daughter Sarah married Benjamin Coe's grandson Sayers, and among the possessions she brought to her new household was Massy, then 12 years old. Massy later married another of the couple's slaves and had five children. She was a slave for life, but her children served only until adulthood. Her eldest son, Peter, gained his freedom in 1831, but decided to remain with the Coe family—illustrating how the interdependence of slave and master was more complicated than a question of legal ownership.

White New Jerseyans had conflicted attitudes toward slavery. Few were troubled by its persistence, and the largest abolitionist organization in the state dissolved in the early 1810s. The state's original constitution provided for universal suffrage, but the legislature stripped blacks (and white women) of the vote in 1807. In the 1830s thousands of whites protesting an abolitionist speech rioted in Newark, ransacking homes, shops, and a church.

At the same time, most whites opposed the interstate slave trade and the expansion of slavery into the West. The legislature cracked down on slaveholders who deported young slaves to the Deep South, where they lost

These all men by the Report that I found before of Benjamin in the County of Hudson in the State of New Jersey for a considerable sum of the sum of fifty dollars to me in hand paid (the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged) by Israel Crane of Bloomfield in the County of Union State of New Jersey a bill of sale to the said Israel Crane a certain Negro Boy named Joe a slave to have & to hold the said Negro boy Joe a slave for & during the term of Nineteen Years from the twenty fifth day of December next ensuing & at that time within the period of his time the former expect a bill of sale to the said Negro boy

Ten Dollars Reward.

RAN-AWAY from the subscriber on the night of the 15th inst. a black boy named *BILL*, about 20 years of age but of small stature; had with him one blue sailor jacket and trowsers, striped swansdown vest—Also a pair of thin shoes, two shirts one white the other brown, besides other clothing. Also one pair of mixt blue and white stockings and fur hat. The above reward and all reasonable charges will be paid to any person who will return the said negro to his master near Newark; or secure him in any jail and give information thereof to the subscriber.

ISRAEL C. CRANE.

N. B. Said boy was in company with an Irish lad, about 19 years of age, but of small stature and limp when he walks—it is supposed they have taken the road to Philadelphia.

Newark, Oct. 17, 1816. \$5.00.

Prominent Montclair businessman Israel Crane held slaves even after abolition began in 1804. He bought Joe for \$50, according to a bill of sale in the Montclair Historical Society archives (far left). Crane posted about a runaway in the Newark Centinel of Freedom, October 22, 1816 (left).

even the minimal rights they had in New Jersey. Gradual abolition, for all its injustice, did phase out the institution. The 1800 census recorded 12,422 slaves in the state. By 1810, there were 10,851; by 1820, 7,557. (These numbers are imprecise because census-takers may not have properly accounted for gradations of slave status.) Many freed blacks moved to Newark, which became the center of a thriving African American community.

Samuel M. Ward of Montclair liberated his slave Anthony Thompson in his will, executed in 1822. Thompson stayed on to serve Ward's widow for six more years. Afterwards, he bought a house at Tory Corner in West Orange.

The Essex County Manumissions Book has 95 listings between 1827 and 1853, showing that many of our area's leading families, such as the Dodds and Baldwins, held slaves well into the 1830s. Nathaniel Crane manumitted the slaves that worked on his father-in-law's farm in Montclair sometime before his death in 1832. His will left a house and six acres to ex-slaves James and Susan Howe. The house still stands at 369 Claremont Avenue.

Another of the final generation of slaves in Essex County was Nancy, held by the Speers in Nutley. She lived over the detached kitchen at the family's house, which still exists on Chestnut Street in that town. Apparently, she was famous locally for her molasses



Howe house on Claremont Avenue in Montclair, once owned by former slaves James and Susan Howe. Photo by Mike Farrelly



Abraham Speer House in downtown Nutley, home to one of the last slaves in Essex County, Nancy. Photo by Mike Farrelly

cookies. Given her freedom in 1834, she chose to stay with the family, which legally had to provide for her in old age.

Through the 1830s and 1840s, the abolition movement stirred back to life. Intrusions by Southern slave catchers, who burst into Jersey households in search of fugitive slaves, made slavery a law-and-order issue for whites, and the legislature formally abolished slavery in 1846. Even then, it wasn't completely gone. All former slaves who were still in captivity were now to be called "apprentices." They did have some new rights; for example, they could file legal complaints about their working conditions. Nonetheless, they were to remain apprentices until their owner decided to manumit them. As of 1860 there were officially still 18 so-called apprentices left; the true number could be closer to 300, according to historian James Gigantino of the University of Arkansas, an expert on abolition. Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 did not apply to them. The institution known as slavery did not end in New Jersey until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment.

A number of books elaborate on the history of slavery in New Jersey. One of the first was Henry S. Cooley's *A Study of Slavery in New Jersey* from 1896. Russell Shorto's *The Island at the Center of the World* offers a glimpse into colonial Dutch life. Clement Price's *Freedom Not*

Far Distant: A Documentary History of Afro Americans in New Jersey describes slavery and the laws governing it. Price was also one of the authors who contributed to a project called "New Jersey Afro Americans From Colonial Times to the Present." James Gigantino's *The Ragged Road to Abolition* analyzes the tortuous process of gradual abolition. Several academic articles also describe the steps involved in ending slavery here: "The Emancipation of Slaves in New Jersey" by D.H. Gardner; "Steal Away, Steal Away: A Guide to the Underground Railroad in New Jersey" by Giles Wright and Edward Wonkeryor; and "The Persistence of Slavery and Involuntary Servitude in a Free State (1685-1866)" by Simeon F. Moss. Useful websites include nlegallib.rutgers.edu/slavery/bibliog.html and slavenorth.com/newjersey.htm. The story of Anthony Thompson appears in a newsletter published by the Montclair Trust Company in the 1930s. That of Jem appears in *Things Old and New from Rutherford* by Margaret G. Riggs.

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